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A ROMANCE
of the
NINETEENTH CENTURY

BY

W. H. MALLOCK

AUTHOR OF 'THE NEW REPUBLIC' ETC.



'DEFECERUNT OCULI MEI IN SALUTARE TUUM'

IN TWO VOLUMES—VOL. I.

London

CHATTO AND WINDUS, PICCADILLY

1881

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BOOK I.

VOL. I.

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CHAPTER I.

THE talents, the family, and the fortune of Ralph Vernon were all quite distinguished enough to make it worth the world's while to attend to him; and the result was that he was at once condemned and courted. This was not perhaps a matter that it is very hard to account for. His manners and his amusements led him to consort with the careless, whilst his deeper interests were really those of the serious; and thus, let him be in what society he would, he was always in a moral sense more or less an

outsider. He had little of the gay good-fellowship which is the virtue most prized by the pleasure-seekers ; he was on the surface far too much of a pleasure-seeker not to irritate those who are busied with thoughts of duty : and his faults, actual or imputed, when they came to the general ear, repelled the one class without attracting the other.

It was supposed that he had trifled with the affections of numerous women ; it was supposed that he had wasted any amount of talent ; it was supposed that, from knowledge or want of knowledge, he was without any kind of Christianity, and that, from want of earnestness, he was quite unmoved by its substitutes ; he was supposed to have many friends warmly attached to him, and to be himself incapable of any warm attachment. And this marked want in him of all that is thought most lovable was made more marked still by his singular charm of manner, which,

for the time being, was certain to win every one. Such was the general impression of him, which, whether true or no, was at all events not groundless ; and there was many a mother in London of the best and purest type who thought his character so cold, so unprincipled, and so repulsive, that he could atone for it only by becoming her daughter's husband.

The number of these mothers was at last reduced to one. Ralph Vernon became engaged to be married. The *fiancée* was young, clever, beautiful, and deeply attached to him ; nor in the case of most men would the event have seemed unnatural. But the general sentiment with regard to Vernon was merely wonder as to what could be here his motive : for most of the world thought what a rough-tongued cousin of his said, ' You may see me d—d if Ralph's ever in love with any one.' Let his motive, however, be what it might,

his engagement caused, or was caused by, a very visible change in him. All of a sudden he seemed to become serious ; and for many months one might have thought him a new man. The father of the bride-elect was at the time absent in Afghanistan, and the marriage was put off till his return the following year. Vernon, meanwhile, said good-bye to his idleness ; he was even not liberal in the days he allowed for love-making. He devoted himself instead to his various county duties ; he studied such subjects as education and pauperism ; he projected the building of schools and cottages ; and he tried to become acquainted with the great mass of his tenantry. Finally, when in 1880, came the renowned general election, he stood in the Conservative interest for his own division of the county, and lost the battle by less than a dozen votes.

This sudden devotion to public affairs,

however, was not construed altogether to his advantage. It was supposed to argue lukewarmness in love, rather than zeal in politics ; nor was the rumour at all wondered at that the lady took the same view of it. Vernon, it was said on all sides, was not behaving well ; it was added by many that he wished to back out of his engagement ; and the latter opinion was certainly confirmed by the sequel. In due time the lady's father returned, and the various legal preliminaries were at once to be got over. What, then, were the feelings of all who heard it when Vernon insisted, as one condition of his marriage, that any children that might result from it should be brought up as Catholics ! The father and the family of the *fiancée* were all fiercely Protestant ; and this move of Vernon's made an end of the whole matter. The rupture was abrupt and painful ; and he was himself severely criticised. That he had

any interest in religion was what nobody gave him credit for ; and he was supposed, in this case, to have used it as a last excuse in his desperation.

His conduct directly afterwards did not disarm the censorious. He was soon reported to have formed another intimacy, and to have given another lady a strong sentimental claim on him. Then, the report went on, he had repeated his former conduct, though this time perhaps more judiciously. There had been no formal engagement, the world supposed ; there had been no need, therefore, for any definite subterfuge. A simpler expedient had been quite sufficient : he had buried himself somewhere in some retreat on the Continent. This second drama had been of a strictly private character ; but there are acute observers who can pierce through any privacy ; and the comments made on it were not of a friendly nature. Indeed, when the

news was known that after all his misdemeanours Vernon was enjoying himself in a charming Provençal villa, surrounded by books, and supplied with a first-class *chef*, one of the keenest and most discriminating of all his feminine acquaintances was at last tempted to speak of him as a voluptuary of the very worst species.

In spite, however, of every ill report, there were a certain number who always stood up for him, and who maintained stoutly that there were two sides to his character. They could not deny that what the world said was true of him; they declared only that it was not the whole truth. There was one of these in especial—Alic Campbell by name—who looked upon Vernon as the best friend he had, and who knew much of his inner history that was quite hidden from others. When Vernon went abroad, he had begged Campbell to go with him; but

Campbell for certain reasons had felt constrained to refuse. Vernon had written from Paris to him, to renew his entreaties, but without the desired result. About a fortnight later he returned to the charge once more.





CHAPTER II.

MY dear Alic,' he wrote, ' I am at last settled ; and I will now take no denial. You must and you shall join me. Could you only see where I am, I should have no need to implore you ; you would come instantly, and come of your own accord. As it is, I can only trust to writing ; but you surely will not refuse me. Come to me do, if for no more than a week or two, and share with me this beautiful Southern solitude. Share my villa with its cool portico—a villa just large enough for two children of Epicurus. Share my

garden with its myrtles, and its oranges, and the softly swaying gold of its great mimosa-trees. Yes, I am here in the South and the clear sunshine; and I am not, as you prophesied and as half my heart urged me, in any of the winter haunts of English fashion and frivolity; but I am embowered safely by myself on the greenest of all the promontories that Europe juts into the Mediterranean. I am settled at the Cap de Juan. I have, indeed, chosen a lovely spot, and already I love it tenderly. All day long, through the leaves of my dark evergreens, and through arched bowery openings, the sea shines and sparkles. You and I may change and grow weary; and we have both had much to weary us. But this bluest of blue seas seems to be always one-and-twenty; and as I breathe its breath, full of eternal freshness, the thrill and the dreams of youth once more revive in me. And ah, the view! In a vast majestic

crescent the French coast of mountains curves away towards Italy, with its succession of pearl-grey headlands dying faintly and far off into the distance. Midway, about ten miles from here as a boat sails, a line of milk-white houses, Nice lies along the sea-level. Range upon range is piled up behind it, blue with far-off haze, or green with nearer olive-woods ; and bright over all, like the hills of another world, are the jagged Alpine summits with their white snows glittering. All day long the lights and the tints vary. New mists form and melt upon the mountains ; the sea changes from one glow to another. The wave-worn sea-rock, pierced with its clear shadows, has always new hues and aspects ; so have the silver gleams that sleep in the spreading stone-pines. The whole face of Nature is like the face of a living thing. It is the face of a Cleopatra.

Age cannot wither it, nor custom stale
Its infinite variety.

‘Alic—you who are coughing, sneezing, and blowing your nose in England—will not this tempt you? Your first impulse will be, I know, to refuse me. You are not in spirits, you will say, for the sunshine; you have no energy left to make any exertion. I am quite familiar with the mood of mind you are in. You are like a man who is sea-sick at the extreme end of a steamer, and who yet will not move himself to make his way to the middle. You are arguing to yourself with the unique logic of grief, “I am comfortless, and therefore nothing shall comfort me.” Let me try to move you to a brighter and a healthier mind.

‘You are wretched, you tell me, because you want to marry a certain person, and because you find that, though she loves you as a friend, she will never love you but as a friend only. Now, I am going to speak very gently to you, and yet I hope convincingly.

I am not going to tell you any such idle lies as that your loss is a trifling one. I am not going to tell you that it is an atom less than you feel it to be; and you would, I think, injure your character by trying to undervalue it. No; I will not tell you to undervalue your loss. I will only show you—a thing you have quite forgotten—how to value your gain. Perhaps you will say I am not in a position to do so, for in some ways certainly you have been somewhat reticent. You have told me much about your own feelings, about your own devotion, and about the moral result that all this has had on you. But about the object of these feelings you have told me little. I know neither how you met her nor how you wooed her; nor anything about her character, except that her ways are simple. You have not told me even her name. But I don't think this matters. Let the difference between our two situations be what it may,

your case in many ways has been also mine ; and I am going now to speak from my own experience.

‘ I, as you know well, was not long since to have married ; and during a good year’s novitiate I was preparing my whole being for its solemn new condition. My character during that period underwent a profound change. My bright-coloured hopes and purposes lost their airy wings. They fell to the solid earth, and found for themselves plodding feet. I felt I was no longer my own. My life was owed to another ; and for the first time there dawned on me the true sense of responsibility. But circumstances combined to make my marriage impossible ; and after I had already learned to mentally mix my life with another’s, our two lives were again made separate. When first I realised this, it was like waking out of a dream. I was conscious of a loneliness I had never known before ;

and even now, with my shattered marriage prospects, my manhood seems to lie in ashes about me. But what do I find has happened? Something glad, strange, and altogether unlooked for. Out of the ashes of my manhood has re-arisen my youth—my youth, which I thought I had said good-bye to for eternity; and the divine child has again run to meet me with its eyes bright as ever, and with the summer wind in its hair. The sun has gone back for me on the dial. I am three years younger again. The skies seem to have grown bluer, and my step more elastic. Once more free and unfettered, I feel sometimes as if I were walking on air; and I have the delicious sense of having lost a burden, even though I may have lost a treasure as well.

‘ You will see my meaning better when I go on to tell you that, though I have recovered the buoyancy of youth, I have by no means recovered its ignorance. I still retain

a certain salvage of wisdom, sad and bitter enough in some ways, and yet good for men like us two to remember. It is this—listen patiently. There is nothing in the world so intensely selfish as a woman's deep affection; and the stronger and more single-hearted it is, the greater becomes its selfishness. A man's passion is generous when compared with a woman's love. A man's passion, at its worst, lasts but a short time; even while it lasts, its demands are limited; and, what is more than this, a good man will restrain it. But the truer and more sensitive a woman is, the more thoroughly will she let her love master her; the less effort will she make to retain the least control of it.

‘And what a master it is! Its jealousy is cruel as the grave, and its demands know no limits but the imagination of her that makes them. A woman who loves thus is not content with the chastest bodily con-

stancy ; she is not content even with the constancy of an undivided tenderness. These she takes for granted : they are not the things she craves for. What she craves for is the constancy of your whole thought and intellect. You are to have nothing in your mind that you do not confide to her ; you are to stifle every interest with which she cannot be associated. If you want any mental help, it is she alone who must help you ; and she had sooner you were helped ill by her than well by another person. She will be as jealous of your friendships as she is of your affections, and as jealous of your thoughts and tastes as she is of your friendships. She cannot patiently conceive of you as in relation to anything excepting herself. She desires to absorb your whole life into hers ; and the larger part of it, which she naturally cannot absorb, she desires to see perish. Her pleading, earnest eyes will be for ever saying

to you, "Entreat me not to leave thee. Where thou goest I will go ; and go not thou, my love, whither I cannot follow thee."

'What!—with all the world of thought and imagination before us, are men such as we are to be tied and bound like this? For my part, the wings of my spirit seem to have all the winds in them ; and I have a heart sometimes likes a hawk's or a wild sea-gull's. It is not a heart that is hard, or that does not soften to companionship. I could often perch tenderly upon some beloved shoulder, and bend my head to listen to words of tenderness. But if the hand that I trusted but once closed to lay hold of me—dared, from love, to use the least pressure to keep me—I should start and struggle, and feel I had suffered treachery. I will stoop my neck myself ; but no one else shall ever draw it an inch downwards. Why do we want companionship? What is a man's need for it?

Were my life really a bird's, I would gladly have a she-bird to fly with me ; but I would have her only because we were bound both of us independently for the same resting-place. That and that alone should be the fetterless fetter we were united by. But a woman who loves deeply will never love like this. She has no wish to be your companion on these terms. It is not the common end that she cares for, but the united struggle ; and she reveres her wish to soar, chiefly because it is an excuse for clinging to you. Thus, on the same principle, she will go nowhere in the mental world herself unless you are there to support her. She thinks it a kind of treason to you to try and walk independently. She cultivates her weakness, that she may be always trusting to your strength ; and though her weight might be dragging you to the ground, she would never think of it, never see it, but if possible she would only lean the

heavier. Was ever selfishness so pitiless and intense as this? And yet, by a strange magic, it looks so like self-devotion, that a man, if he be not a brute, can hardly fail to be crushed by it. Such love, Alic, may be a thing that suits some temperaments, but surely neither yours nor mine.

‘ And now I am once more my own. Ah, the sweetness and rest of this serene self-possession! But lately I felt, when I was looking even at the sea or the mountains, that I was not permitted to love them. The shadow of another would always seem to cleave to me and claim me; and I could no longer let my spirit, as I used to do, go floating on the lonely waters. But now I can look everywhere without fear. I can say to the sea, when it makes me in love with loneliness, “I violate no allegiance due to any companionship.” I can say the same to the forest, when its leafy smells woo me, and

the murmur of its brown branches. I can say the same in society, when bright eyes and alluring voices stimulate me, and I feel that many women are far better than one. Then, too—though I will not dwell upon this here—were there a God to turn to, I could turn to Him in solitude. And now in the morning, as I awaken, I often turn to my pillow, and kiss it, and say, “No head but mine can ever dare to press you.” All the walls of my bedroom seem to smile kindly and quietly on me. By my bedside I see my dear companions, my books—so varied and so unobtrusive—that will themselves tell me all they can, and will ask for no confidence in return; and there, too, I see my letters, which have now the new charm for me, that no one but myself will ever want to open them.

‘Yes; I have learned the truest secret of Epicurus, that the friendship of a man is

more than the love of a woman. Friendship is always a free gift; and it is always given readily because it is never owed. Love, too, begins as a gift; but a loving woman will never leave it so. Before you know it, she will have turned it into a debt; and the more she loves the debtor, the more oppressively will she extort the utmost farthing from him. But between friends, Alic, the intercourse is always free. I could have no thought that it would be treason to conceal from you. I could form no ties or friendships that would do you any wrong. And yet—if I may alter Shakespeare in a single word—

And yet, by heaven, I hold my *friend* as rare
As any she belied by false compare.

‘Come, then, and lay all this to your heart; for your heart, I know, will assent to its truth as mine does. Marriage would suit you no better than me. It allured me first

with its many pleasing promises ; and in the same way it is now alluring you. It can give much to numbers ; I do not deny that for a moment ; but neither you nor I were made for it. In missing it, as I have said before, you are no doubt a loser ; but my advice to you is, do not brood over the loss ; think of the gain, for the gain is far greater. Recall your imagination from the solace you would have had in marriage, and dwell on the joys and the freedom that you keep because you are single.

‘ Freedom—yes, you have that still. You have not the caprices of any one else to bind you. My dear Alic, think of your priceless freedom ! I say think of it ; but I want you to use it also. I want you to come to me, away from your frosty England, and let me see the Southern sunlight laughing in your glad grey eyes. If you will, all my house shall welcome you. My champagne is excellent ;

my cigars and cigarettes are excellent—I had them all sent from London ; and my bookcases are well stored with poets, and with your own philosophers. At the end of one of my walks is a certain marble seat. You look straight down at the sea from it, and it is overarched with myrtles. There is a perfect wilderness of green shade behind it ; and in the midst of this, like an enchanted lamp, is a great camellia tree, burning with scarlet blossoms. Close at hand there is a little table, just fit to support a bottle of Burgundy, and a quaint old glass goblet for each of us. It is an entrancing place. It is a bower after your own heart. And there we might sit together, in the calm, delicious mornings, talking or silent, just as the mood prompted us. Sometimes we might quote to each other our favourite poets ; sometimes we might solve again the old insoluble questions we have so often discussed before, and which are still

eating my life out ; sometimes we might watch in quiet the waves and the rocks before us, and often, too, some gay, bright-coloured fishing-boat, floating lonely with its white plume of a sail, and its brown fisher at the stern bending over his own reflection. Yes, Alic, if you will only come out to me, we will contrive to elude the Furies. We will look into life together more clearly than we used to do ; but it shall be a personal oppression to us no more than it used to be. We will only enter here on a new phase of youth. We will have free, cloudless days, and nights of moonlight. We will drive, and ride, and sail, and explore the whole country. We will know the folds of the hills grey with olive-trees ; we will listen to the sound of mule-bells ; we will see how the middle-age lingers in the wild hill-villages. Then, too, my own immediate neighbourhood—that is delightful also. The whole of my green peninsula is an

Eden of woods and gardens ; and the life that surrounds you there is like a living idyll. Old brown crones crouching under the olive-trees, the peasant proprietor tilling his small field, the neatly dressed nursery-gardener surveying his glass frames, the retired domestic tradesman smiling over the gate of his little villa-garden—these are the living images that surround one, and that give to one's thoughts such a quaint, delightful setting. A strange mixture, too, on all sides touches one of homely plenty and of wild luxuriance. Cabbages and palm-trees grow in the same enclosure. Between beds of kitchen stuff are strips starred with anemones, and pink almond-blossoms tremble among the apple-trees.

‘Ah, my old companion, will not these pleasures move you? Write, write to me quickly, and say they will. Only in that case I have something further to tell you. If you

would enjoy the seclusion I have described to you, you must come and enjoy it speedily : and for this reason. On one side of me is a beautiful marble villa, with immense gardens and long winding walks ; and on the other side, with immense gardens also, is a large disused hotel, whose proprietors last year were bankrupt. It is built like an old *château*. It has quaint vanes on the gables ; and flights of marble steps lead up to the doors and windows. It is just at the cape's point ; and its domain of gardens, with their long walks and terraces, and their arches of trellised roses, are bounded on three sides by the sea. Those gardens, silent and lifeless, not a soul but the gardeners now walks in them—the gardeners and myself, and, who should you think besides ? Poor Frederic Stanley—the cleverest of our Oxford idlers ; who, since we knew him, has been first a guardsman, and is now a Catholic priest.

How time does change some men! Stanley is here for his health: he is broken down with work. He looks, I fancy, rather askance at me; but we have often little reserved conversations together.

‘ However I am wandering from the point. What I want to tell you is this. Up till now the hotel and the villa have been alike tenantless, and I have been able to use both gardens as my own; but that happy period is now drawing fast to a close. Some English people, whose names I do not know, though no doubt I shall soon make their acquaintance, are coming, or perhaps have already come, to the villa. And as to the hotel, what do you think has happened? Our friend the Duchess has taken it—it is still furnished—for the whole of next month, and intends having a large party there. So you see that very soon I shall be saying good-bye to solitude. This last piece of news

I have only this instant learned, and from the Duchess herself. I can't exactly say if I am glad or sorry. I shall have at all events a very enlivening neighbour; and her company always charms me. It is not the charm now, as it must once have been, of beauty and sentiment. It is what at fifty supplies their place, and rivals them; it is the charm of mundane humour. This bright, gay humour of feminine middle-age, it always seems to me, is a very rare gift. It is a highly artificial product, and is almost peculiar, I think, to one class of society. It requires to develop it a combination of two things in the past—the susceptibilities of the world of romance, and the indulgence of them in the word of fashion. However, be our friend's charm what it will, I am at this moment going to enjoy it; as in another five minutes I shall be at dinner with her.

And this at last brings me to a con

fession which will amuse you. Where do you think I am writing you this letter? Not in my philosophic garden, not in my quiet study. All about me is gas-light and gilding, and a murmur of garish life. The figures surrounding me are gamblers and Parisian *cocottes*; and I am breathing, not the scent of the sea or of flowers, but of patchouli and faint stale cigarette smoke. I am in the reading-room at Monte Carlo. I drove over here this morning—or rather, my coachman drove me—partly to try a new pair of horses, and partly for the sake of the starlight drive back again. The Duchess is staying for a day or two at the hotel attached to the gambling-rooms, and it seems she has a little dinner party every night in the restaurant. To-night the Grantlys are coming. You remember Grantly at Oxford? He is now in the First Life Guards; and his wife is a lovely American, whose face is even prettier

than her dresses, and, if possible, even more changing.

‘*À propos* of the women here, there is one on the sofa opposite me, who is really divinely lovely. Whenever I look up from my writing, I am met by her soft large eyes, half sad and half voluptuous in their tenderness. She is as different from the women near her as day from night, or rather as the stars from gas-light. She is one of the fallen; I fear there can be no doubt about that; but refinement—even a sort of nobleness—can outlive virtue. There is not a touch of paint on her; and her dress, which fits her perfectly, is strangely simple. If I have any skill in reading the looks of women, there is something of a higher life yet lingering in that soft, pleading face, that she half hides from me by her large crimson fan. Some women have a glance that makes me long to

talk to them, just as clear sea-water makes me long to plunge in it.

‘Write to me soon. I am obliged to stop now.

‘By the way, besides the Grantlys, there is another guest expected, who is to me more interesting. I mean Lord Surbiton. He was the first man of letters I ever knew; and when I was seventeen, he seemed to me little short of a god.

‘Good-bye; I must be going. My fair one is rising too.’





CHAPTER III.

THE Duchess's stately figure was familiar at Monte Carlo, and many an eye followed her as she entered the gorgeous restaurant.

'Garçon,' she said, as she took her seat at the large table reserved for her, '*Pommery et gréno, extra sec*—the last champagne on the wine list. You must put three bottles in ice instantly, for in five minutes we shall be quite ready for dinner. And—wait, wait a moment, man, for I have not done speaking to you—we are not going to pay thirty-six francs again for a single dish of asparagus ; so you

will perhaps have the goodness to recollect that. And you must lay another place if you please, as we shall be five dining this evening instead of four.'

Captain and Mrs. Grantly appeared almost immediately, and with them was an elderly man in close attendance on the latter. The young guardsman and his wife were a very characteristic couple, and looked like a bright embodiment of the spirit of modern London. The appearance of their companion was very different. His dress was too showy for what is now correct taste, and his jewelled scarf-pin and sleeve-links were both of enormous size. But on him these splendours seemed to lose half their offensiveness. They were plainly the *fashion* of a past generation, not the *vulgarities* of the present one: they even heightened by contrast the strange effect of his face, with its worn weary cheeks, and his keen glance like

an eagle's. This was none other than the renowned Lord Surbiton—the poet, diplomat, and dandy who had charmed the last generation.

The whole party had been winning largely at the tables, and their spirits were quite in keeping with the glittering scene around them. The crowd which filled the restaurant was to-night even more gay than usual. All the men were at least dressed like gentlemen, and most of the women were far more splendid than ladies. Fashionable exiles from the English world of fashion were detected in numbers by the amused eyes of the Duchess ; and with them the fair companions who had caused their exile or were sharing it. It was said even that royalty was not absent, and that there thus was a divine element unrecognised in the midst of the human. Everywhere there was a flashing of restless eyes and diamonds ; furred and embroidered

opera-cloaks were being disposed of over the backs of chairs ; long gloves were being unbuttoned and drawn off ; and white hands, glistening with rings, were composing deranged tresses. Above was the arched ceiling glowing with gold and pictures ; and the walls, florid with ornament, returned every shaft of lamplight from the depths of immense mirrors, or the limbs of naked goddesses.

‘ Now, this,’ said the Duchess, ‘ is exactly what I enjoy : charming company, a charming scene before one, and—let me tell you all, for I myself ordered it—a really excellent dinner. However,’ she went on, as she unfolded her napkin, and looked with a slow smile at the *menu*, ‘ we must be temperate in the midst of plenty ; for remember, Mrs. Grantly, you and I and your husband are to go back to the tables again for one half-hour afterwards—only one half-hour, mind ; and then, as Lord Surbiton suggests—he is always,

as we all know, poetical—we will have our coffee outside, and compose our feelings under the stars of heaven.'

'What!' said Mrs. Grantly, 'and is Lord Surbiton not coming back to the rooms with us?'

'Not he,' said the Duchess. 'He's not half a man at gambling. I don't think your poets ever are. But where,' she exclaimed presently, as she saw that a chair was vacant, 'where is Mr. Vernon? Has any one seen our Mr. Ralph Vernon? We can't possibly get on without our one unmarried young man; though, to say the truth, till this moment I had quite forgotten to miss him.'

'Mr. Vernon!' echoed Mrs. Grantly with a laugh. 'I'd advise you, Duchess, not to count upon him. I saw him on the hotel steps only ten minutes ago, and what do you think he was doing? Why, he was talking to that beautiful creature we were all admiring

at the tables—the woman with the red fan and the long dark eyelashes. I don't know what she was saying, I'm sure, but she had her hand on his arm, and he was bending down to her.'

'Oh, ho——' began the Duchess, with a soft low laugh. But Lord Surbiton interrupted her.

'Vernon!' he said; 'can this be the Ralph Vernon that I once knew, some thirteen years ago—a dreamy eager boy, who used to come and show me his poetry?'

'To be sure it is,' said the Duchess. 'Poetry, painting, and heaven knows what else—I believe he has tried all of it.'

'Ah!' said Lord Surbiton; 'I once had great hopes of him. I once thought he was signed with the veritable sign of genius.'

'Well,' replied the Duchess, 'and he *is* very clever, I believe.'

'Men who are clever,' said Lord Surbiton

solemnly, 'we can count by millions: men with genius we count by units. As for Vernon, his early verses were beautiful, in spite of their crude language. They had the same charm in them that his ideal eyes had—little of the gladness of youth, but all its sweetness and its hunger.'

'It seems,' said the Duchess, 'that this is a young man who is very much to be envied; for in addition to all these charms, he has two others that women think irresistible—a fortune and a history.'

'Yes,' said Lord Surbiton, with a wave of his jewelled hand; 'women are always attracted by a man with a history, because it always means that he is to be either blamed or pitied.'

'And what,' said Mrs. Grantly, 'may Mr. Vernon's history be?'

'Ah!' said the Duchess, 'that's just what we don't know, and that's the very reason

why we find it so interesting. Never be too curious, my dear, about a friend's history ; and then you can always stick up for him with a clear conscience.'

'Look !' exclaimed Mrs. Grantly, 'here the charmer comes. I only hope he won't be trying all his fascinations on me.'

Vernon was full of regrets for being behind his time ; but these he discovered were met with nothing but laughter. Mrs. Grantly assured him at once that they knew all about him and his doings. 'And this is the man,' she went on—'now, I ask you all to look at him—who says he has come abroad for the sake of philosophic solitude !'

'And why not ?' said Vernon ; 'I think I am quite consistent. Solitude is my wife, and society is my mistress ; and I like to live with the one, and be always intriguing with the other.'

'Well,' exclaimed Mrs. Grantly, 'since

we are your society for the moment, our collective place in your heart is, I must say, not very honourable.'

'Never mind about that,' said the Duchess. 'What my suspicions rest upon is Mr. Vernon's solitude—that retiring villa of his at the Cap de Juan : especially now we hear all this about red fans, and whisperings, and hotel door-steps, and long eyelashes.'

'My attentions on the door-step,' said Vernon, 'were of the strictly Platonic order. There is something rather touching in that woman, when one comes to talk to her.'

'Very likely,' said Captain Grantly drily ; 'there always is. *Touching* is the exact word for it. And what's her rank, Vernon ? Is she a princess or a duchess ?'

'If she's a princess,' said Vernon, 'she must have lost her principality ; for she was dreadfully in want of a thousand francs to gamble with.'

‘Very likely,’ said Captain Grantly ; ‘ they all are.’

The Duchess, meanwhile, was surveying the motley scene before her. ‘ I confess,’ she said with a soft smile of amusement, ‘ this is hardly the place one would come to if one were in search of Platonic attachments. Now, look round, all of you, and take stock of the company. There are plenty of men one knows—of course, one expects that ; but the women with them—did you ever see anything like it ? Come, Mr. Vernon, you understand these things. Just observe the couple behind you—they can’t talk English, so we needn’t mind discussing them—are they man and wife, do you think ? Or that fine lady, with the hair sprinkled with gold-dust, whom Lord Surbiton seems to admire so—what relation should you say she was to the old Jew she is dining with ? Upon my word, Mrs. Grantly,’ she added presently, ‘ I

don't believe that, our two selves excepted, there's a single woman here you could possibly call respectable.'

'That's the very reason,' said Mrs. Grantly, 'why I like being here so much. It makes me feel like an angel. But talking of angels, there goes a genuine one, if you like, for you; there goes Colonel Stapleton. Oh my! and isn't he grown fat and ugly! You'd never have thought—would you?—that that man was once the best dancer in London. And, Duchess,' she went on, 'I hope you admire the big checks on his coat. 'Twould take four of him, I guess, to play one game of chess upon.'

Colonel Stapleton was a florid man of it might be five-and-forty. Despite his inclination to stoutness, he held himself well and gracefully, and had an air about him of dissolute good-breeding. He had one other charm, too, of which Vernon was at once

made sensible—a taking and very musical voice, which, as he stopped for a moment to speak to a friend dining, could be heard distinctly at the Duchess's table. 'The one with the red fan?' he was saying gaily; 'yes, she, if you like it, is a regular out-and-outer. She's down here, so she tells me, with some fellow who belongs to the "Figaro."' '

Vernon and Captain Grantly both overheard this. The former was somewhat annoyed, and the latter amused at it, though he was at the same time frowning over his wife's late observations. 'Poor old Jack Stapleton!' he said; 'Jessie can't bear him, though I'm sure I don't know why. He's as good-hearted a fellow as ever lived, and is nobody's enemy but his own.'

'To be sure,' said the Duchess. 'We all of us know Jack Stapleton. If he was a little bit thinner, your wife would be only too delighted with him.'

Mrs. Grantly, however, was by no means silenced.

‘Look at his back,’ she said, ‘as he’s sitting down to his dinner. Isn’t selfishness written in every curve of it? The way’—she went on, as she leant over to the Duchess—‘the way that man behaved to a young girl I know is something more than words can describe to you.’

‘Jessie!’ exclaimed her husband sharply, as if determined to change the subject, ‘look behind you for a minute. There’s the old hag—don’t you see her?—who tried to collar your money this afternoon at the tables. It’s worth while watching her just to see how she claws her wine-glass.’

‘I hadn’t observed her,’ said the Duchess. ‘Well, she at any rate has no compromising diamonds, and no wicked Lothario to attend to her.’

Mrs. Grantly’s eye lit up with a sudden

laughter. 'Lord Surbiton,' she said, as she touched his arm with her fan, and pointed out the old woman in question, 'I guess I can show you one virtuous woman here. *Her* morals, I am sure, are strictly unimpeachable. I'll lay you six to one on them in black-silk stockings.'

Lord Surbiton eyed Mrs. Grantly with a look of somewhat sinister gallantry. 'If your feet and ankles,' he said, 'are as lovely as your hands and wrists, I shall proudly pay the bet, even if I have the sad fortune to win it.'

'In that case,' said Mrs. Grantly drily, 'I shall ask you to make your bets with my husband. If you will do so with him on the same principle next Ascot, we shall still manage, perhaps, to keep out of the work-house.'

Mrs. Grantly, though she said what she chose herself, could always hold her own to

perfection; and Lord Surbiton's gaze was now at once withdrawn from her. But a few minutes afterwards, when he again turned to her, there was a change in his whole expression that she was not prepared for. His worn face, as a friend had once observed of him, was like a battered stage on which the scenery was always shifting; and it now had a strange appearance, as of some ruinous transformation-effect. Every trace of its late look had gone from it: it gleamed, instead, with a grave uncertain tenderness, like a light from a lost boyhood; and even his artificial manner when he spoke did not destroy the impression.

'You have shown me,' he said, 'one virtuous woman. Let me now show you another. Do you see the two who have this moment entered?'

The eyes of all the party were turned in

the same direction. There was no mistaking for an instant who it was that had attracted him. Standing close to the door, and looking about her in some uncertainty, was a tall English girl, in company of an elder lady. The two had apparently come there to dine, and, being strange to the place, did not know where to bestow themselves. The girl's hesitation, however, could scarcely be called embarrassment. The scene seemed to distress far more than to embarrass her; though it would hardly have been unnatural if it had done both. There was a proud reserve, however, in her graceful movements and attitude, which, amongst such surroundings, sufficed at once to distinguish her. She was very pale, with a brow and throat like a magnolia blossom; only her lips, in the words of Solomon, seemed by contrast 'a thread of scarlet;' and her large clear eyes were dark as the darkest violet. She stood there in

the glare and glitter like a creature from another world.

Lord Surbiton broke silence in slow, measured accents. 'It looks,' he said, 'as if an angel had descended in the midst of us, like a snow-flake.'

There was a pause. The apparition astonished the whole party. Vernon's eyes, in especial, were fixed intently on her.

'Angel or no angel,' said the Duchess presently, 'I can see, even from this distance, that she gets her clothes, not from heaven, but Paris: and nothing costs so much as well-made angelic simplicity. However joking apart,' she added, and more seriously 'upon my word I quite agree with Lord Surbiton. It is literally an angel's face; and a very high-bred angel's into the bargain. But, good gracious!—what a place to bring her to!'

Suddenly the two strangers were observed

to move forward into the room, while the younger one first started, and then broke into a smile.

‘Look!’ said the Duchess with interest, ‘they have evidently found some one they know here. Let us try and discover who it is.’

‘Oh my!’ exclaimed Mrs. Grantly, ‘I can see who: and—would you believe it?—why, it’s Colonel Stapleton! Duchess, you don’t know what you missed. You should have seen how he jumped up when he saw them, like a beer-barrel on springs! And there’s your angel, Lord Surbiton—there she is, shaking hands with him. Well, all I can say is, that I wish her joy of her company.’

‘Come, Mr. Vernon,’ said the Duchess, as dinner drew to a close, ‘you seem very silent and abstracted. This interesting young lady has clearly made an impression on you.’

‘Haven’t you noticed him?’ said Mrs.

Grantly; 'he's been watching her all the time; and I can tell by his face that he's jealous of Colonel Stapleton. However, Mr. Vernon, there is one crumb of comfort for you; she has not been dining at the same table with him.'

'No,' said Captain Grantly, 'but she's looked round and smiled at him every ten minutes. Keep yourself calm, Vernon, and don't go calling old Jack out for it.'

'I should think,' said Vernon, with a gravity he was quite unconscious of, 'that they are relations of some kind or other—cousins,' he went on meditating, 'cousins probably, or perhaps even niece and uncle.'

'Capital!' exclaimed the Duchess. 'He's thought the whole matter out to himself. Mr. Vernon, your tastes are, I must say, most versatile. You begin the dinner with Venus, and you wind it up with Diana. But tell me,' she went on, as she pushed her chair back,

and sedately prepared to rise, 'are you a gambler as well as a lover? For if not, you will perhaps smoke here with Lord Surbiton, while we three go back to the tables for a little; and then we will all meet presently outside for our coffee.'





CHAPTER IV.

LEFT *tête-à-tête* with Vernon, Lord Surbiton fixed his eyes on him, drawing meanwhile from his pocket a gorgeous gold cigarette case. 'That tobacco,' he said solemnly through the soft smoke-puffs, 'which has the subtlest of all aromas, was grown amongst the haunted hills of Syria.' This probably may have been true enough : he omitted to add, however, that he had bought it himself in a spot no more haunted than Bond Street. But the old elaborate manner which had once impressed Vernon, now again arrested him ; though his

eyes had still been straying in the direction of the fair stranger.

‘It is a long time,’ went on Lord Surbiton, ‘since I last saw you; or to one, young as you are, it must seem long.’

‘I like to be called young,’ said Vernon, ‘for I have at least one sign of age in me, and that is I am beginning to value my youth.’

‘Happy philosopher,’ cried the other, ‘who can value the treasure while you still possess it! When last I saw you, you were just leaving Eton, and you had not learnt such wisdom then. You came to me one morning before luncheon, sad and eager, with some verses of yours, that you might ask what a poet thought of them. I suggested that you should read them aloud to me, but you were too modest to do so; so I took them myself, and read them aloud to you. When I had finished I looked up, and there

were two large tears trembling in my young bard's eyes.'

'What!' exclaimed Vernon, 'and do you really remember that unfortunate boyish stuff of mine?'

'Boy,' said Lord Surbiton, 'your verses were *not* stuff; and there are certain things which *I* never forget—

Oh Goddess, I am sick at heart, o'erworn
With weariness,
For the weight of life is bitter to be borne
Companionless.

That is how your verses began: you see I can quote them still. Professedly, they were a sort of prayer to Diana: but really they were far more than that. They were the voice of youth that is heard through all the ages—youth crying in its solitude for some high companionship. There is nothing, Vernon, so unutterably melancholy as a boy's passionate purity: and for me you were then the symbol of the eternal longing of boyhood.'

‘How well,’ said Vernon, ‘I remember that little poem of mine, though I confess I am surprised that you do! I remember the day I wrote it, and the sound of it still rings in my ears; but there is one thing wanting—one thing quite gone from me—and that is the sort of longing I meant to express in it. My thoughts and my aspirations of those days have become a mystery to myself. I am startled to find sometimes how utterly I have lost the clue to them.’

‘That is always the way,’ said Lord Surbiton, ‘when life is still developing, and one form of eagerness succeeds and dispossesses another. It is in virtue of this process that you now see your youth to be valuable. In the middle age of your boyhood you longed sadly for the unattainable; in the boyhood of your middle age, you idealise the attainable. Happy philosopher, I again say to you—philo-

sopher, lover, poet, and man of the world in one !’

‘ I doubt,’ said Vernon smiling, ‘ if I now idealise anything ; and I fear, Lord Surbiton, that you idealise me. I am no longer a lover, nor even a would-be poet.’

‘ Not a poet on paper, it may be ; but a poet in the way life touches you, and in the demands you make on it. To be a poet in this sense, you need never have written a line ; and yet the name may fit you, without any violence to its meaning. The imagination is for every man the co-creator of his universe, and those men are poets whose imaginations create most gloriously. And yet, my dear Vernon, you say you no longer idealise ! I shall as soon believe that as that you are no longer a lover. Why, within this last couple of hours, you have been making love to one lady, and longing, we all thought, to make love to another.’

‘ Ah ! ’ said Vernon ; ‘ but the excitement of making love is very different from the still devotion of loving. What I have ceased to be capable of, what I have lost even the power of imagining, is a single passion that shall sway or fulfil one’s life. Love seems to me now to be very much like temper. Your dearest friend can irritate you into the one ; the most commonplace woman can trick you into the other : and you adore in the latter case, and you accuse and abuse in the former, in a way which by-and-by you can only stupidly wonder at. I do not want to speak cynically about this. A cynic is a foolish fellow who either is ignorant, or pretends to be, of a good third of an average man’s motives—those that are not contemptible ; and I know that love, as a fact, can be pure and true and faithful, and that it is really to many the one thing worth living for. I only speak for myself ; and all that I can see in

it is a passionate perversity both of judgment and of feeling. It exaggerates the value of the special individual, just as cynicism does the opposite for the race in general. The concentrated praise is as false as the diffused censure. Each is equally silly to the eye of the calm judgment. My wish now is for no emotion but such as I can master. I wish to possess myself, not to appropriate others ; and with regard to women I agree with the poet Donne—

I can love her and her, and you and you ;
I can love any, so she be not true.'

'I did not expect,' said Lord Surbiton, 'when I called you a lover, to find you still content at thirty with the intangible charms of a moon-goddess. As we live on, we are obliged to take the attainable, and do our best to idealise that. You say you are not constant. Well, no true artist is ; and you have the artist's temper, I see, just as you

have the poet's—two things which by no means always go together : indeed to unite them is a rare triumph of character. Many poets perhaps might have drawn a Desdemona : only an artistic poet could have drawn an Iago also. What marks the poetic temper is the intensity of its sympathy ; what marks the artistic is the versatility. The artist not only feels much, but he also feels many things ; and in this way he always preserves his balance. Every one at the beginning has had the makings of several characters in him. The artist has the makings of an indefinite number. Most men, farther out of their possible characters, harden or settle down into one, but the artist never does ; for character is nothing but prejudice or trick grown permanent, and the artist has no character, just as the chameleon is said to have no colour. Thus when vulgar critics declare with regard to some artistic

writer's creations—as often and often they have done with regard to mine, for instance—“ Here are his own feelings ; he has drawn this man from himself,” they are at once right and wrong. He has not only drawn *this* man from himself, but he has drawn all ; for he becomes himself some new man to be drawn from, every time he suppresses some newly-combined nine-tenths of himself. This, Vernon, is the true artistic versatility ; and her Grace—who by the way is an uncommonly shrewd woman—at once saw you possessed it. You can respond in the same half-hour, she told you, to the beauty of Diana and of Venus. Such versatility is the true elixir of youth ; it makes even the wisdom of age supple. My dear fellow,’ he said, somewhat coming down from his pedestal, ‘constancy, though we know its value for most men, is the elixir of middle age. It makes you five-and-forty at once, and it keeps you there.’

Vernon at this moment let his eye wander, and a sudden exclamation broke from him which at once put a stop to philosophy.

‘Damn it!’ he said, ‘we have been talking of dead Dianas; and meanwhile the living one has taken flight, and deserted us.’

Lord Surbiton turned his head, and saw that the fair stranger and her companion had gone. Where feminine beauty was concerned, he was always prompt and practical; and he at once set about rising, though his movements were somewhat slow.

‘She can’t have gone far,’ he said. ‘We shall be sure to see her again somewhere; and her Grace, or Captain Grantly, will find out all about her for us. Or failing these, there is that fellow, Stapleton.’

He took Vernon’s arm with a sedate and leisurely dignity, and the two left the restaurant. They paused in the cloak-room

which is just outside, and Lord Surbiton was being helped by a garçon into a magnificent sable overcoat, when a female figure appeared, with a look that at once attracted him. This was none other than the lady of the red fan. She had come for her opera-cloak; and before Vernon was even aware of her presence, Lord Surbiton, with as quick a gallantry as his years permitted him, was arranging it tenderly for her, over her finely-shaped shoulders.

He was sufficiently delighted with his performance thus far; but a still greater pleasure awaited him. The lady cast a glance at him with her soft, appealing eyes, and murmured, '*Merci, milord.*' She did not blush, but she looked much as if she wished to do so. Lord Surbiton at once laid his hand on his heart, and was begging to be told how he was honoured by madame knowing him. 'Ah!' she replied, 'and need

a renowned man ask? Why, the poems and the romances of monsieur are as much read in Paris as in London.' Here she caught sight of Vernon; and, with the quietest smile in the world, 'I am going,' she went on, 'once more to the tables. Will not you two come, and join your luck with mine?'

Lord Surbiton was completely charmed with her, and regretted not a little that to do this was impossible. He was almost aware of a slight pang of jealousy when she bid Vernon to put in more securely a diamond pin that had become loose in her hair.

Vernon's hands lingered over the soft brown plaits. 'You are very lovely,' he said, 'though, of course, you don't need to be told that; and my morals will let you play with my heart, though my prudence, I fear, will not let you play with my fortune.'

He was in the middle of uttering this, when he glanced aside for a moment, and his

eyes met those of the girl to seek whom he had just risen from the dinner-table. It was but a glance she gave him ; and then her fair head was averted : but the glance and the gesture were only too expressive to him. She seemed at once to comprehend and be surprised at the scene he was taking part in, and to turn away from it with contempt, pain, and aversion. A disagreeable sense of shame at once came over him ; nor were his reflections made pleasanter by what he observed next moment. As the girl, with her companion, was quitting the cloak-room, he was just able to see her face light up for an instant ; and directly afterwards Colonel Stapleton entered.

The Colonel seemed almost as versatile as Lord Surbiton himself ; for he was quite as familiar with the fair Aspasia as he had been a moment before with the pale and virginal stranger. Vernon and Lord Surbiton

had been conversing with the former lady in French; and his lordship, who was somewhat deaf, had pronounced her accent perfect. The Colonel, however, to whom she turned instantly, composedly addressed some chaff to her in the homeliest English possible; and she with an equal fluency, though with a strong foreign twang, replied, 'If you don't look out, I shall smack your nasty little head for you.'

Vernon started at this astounding utterance, as if an adder had stung him. 'Good Heavens!' he exclaimed to himself, 'what an absolute fool I am!' And not without some *brusquerie*, which the fair one mistook for jealousy, he succeeded in withdrawing Lord Surbiton, and making a hasty exit. 'Her French,' he muttered, 'may be the French of the Faubourg, but her English is very certainly the English of Regent Street.'

Lord Surbiton, however, had completely

missed the above piece of *badinage*; and pausing on the hotel door-steps, and laying his hand upon Vernon's arm, 'What a woman that is!' he exclaimed, with a slow gravity. 'It is in her class, after all, that the soul of the old world still lives on, with its passion, its grace, and its intellect; and we, in our barbarous virtue, actually affect to look down on her. A woman like that ought to have lived at Athens, and have had a Pericles for her companion, and a Socrates for her pupil.'

Vernon made no response to this. His thoughts were still busy with those clear eyes that had humbled him. 'So much,' he said bitterly to himself, 'for a woman's power of insight! She looks nothing but scorn at me, and yet smiles like a sister at that fat, sensual beast there!'

Before long Lord Surbiton began again, as they went in the direction where they

expected to find their party. 'Ah, my dear Vernon!' he said, drawing a deep sigh that made his satin necktie creak, 'it is the artist's gift——' Here he paused for a moment to eye critically two young ladies who passed him. 'It is the artist's gift,' he resumed, 'to discern between good and evil; it is his doom to be the servant of neither. He surveys life as a Cæsar surveyed the circus: and the affections and lusts of men can say nothing to him but *morituri te salutant*. He belongs to a middle race who are neither divine nor human, and he cannot really ally himself with any human being. This is why, when he dies, there are no flowers strewn on his tomb—no rosemary for remembrance, or pansies for tender thoughts; but only the bloomless laurel—the leaf, not of love, but of homage.'

'Lord Surbiton'—it was the voice of the Duchess—'when you've done quoting poetry,

you'll find us all here, ready for you to discover us.' She was seated with the Grantlys outside the café, at a round table laden with cups and liqueur-glasses. 'See,' she went on, 'we have ordered everything, and we have been so thoughtful that we have even kept chairs for you.'

'It seems to me,' said Lord Surbiton, 'that your Grace has kept two a-piece for us.'

'Ah!' said the Duchess, laughing, 'those two other chairs are for some particular friends of mine, whom I asked just now to come and have their coffee with us. Now, Mr. Vernon, here is a riddle for you. Who should you think these particular friends are? Why, your fair paragon of the restaurant, and the old lady, her aunt. I met them five minutes ago, as we were coming here from the gambling-rooms, and it flashed on me all of a sudden who the aunt was. You, Lord

Surbiton, will remember her. She's the widow of Sir Edward Walters, who was our Minister for so many years at Stuttgart; and the girl—I remember her too quite well now—is that beautiful Cynthia Walters, who was made such a fuss about in London three seasons ago, and then got ill, and has never appeared since. Her home, it seems, is now with her aunt in Florence.'

'Look out, Duchess,' said Captain Grantly.
'Here they are coming.'





CHAPTER V.

LADY WALTERS was a woman of great sweetness of manner, yet with a touch now and then of subdued humour. She produced the impression that she had once known the world, but that she hardly knew it now ; for knowledge of the world can be forgotten like other knowledge, and from certain gentle natures it slips away easily.

She and Lord Surbiton had an extremely friendly greeting, and settled down at once into a talk over old days. As for Vernon

his position was less comfortable. The Duchess introduced him to Miss Walters, who had at first been unaware of his presence: but the instant she recognised him the smile died on her lips, and she acknowledged his bow as coldly as any young lady of fashion who seems to deny an acquaintance in the very act of formally making it.

Vernon felt utterly worsted by her perfect *savoir faire*; and what added not a little to his suffering was that the Duchess should witness his discomfiture, without knowing what he felt sure was the cause of it. Too proud or self-conscious to risk any further repulse, he listened silently to the girl's answers, as the Duchess put her through a rapid catechism. 'We have taken,' she said, 'a villa beyond Nice, in the country. We arrived but three days ago, from Florence. We came over here this afternoon for the music; but missed our train back again, and

so had to remain for dinner. I don't know what we should have done if Colonel Stapleton, whom I have known from a child, had not secured a table for us. I think this place horrible. I was here once before, and I detested it.'

Vernon watched her intently as she was giving these answers. The moments were few ; but to him they were like a long dream. He seemed to become familiar with all the folds of her drapery, and each outline of arm or figure that her dress revealed or hinted at. There was a subtle air with her of fastidious fashion, from her hat to her pointed shoes and the long black gloves concealing her dainty hands. But this was not all, or at any rate Vernon thought not. She seemed not only a woman of fashion, but a woman of fashion who had the soul of a sibyl in her ; and her clear eyes seemed touched with some high wistful melancholy.

The impression she made on the Duchess was different. Her Grace had found Miss Walters somewhat chilly in manner ; so she brought her questions pretty soon to a close, and addressed herself to Mrs. Grantly. Vernon hoped with trembling that now might be his chance : but no, it was not to be. Miss Walters turned away from him, and seemed lost in the scene before her. That scene was one which is certainly unique in Europe, and it was now wearing its strangest and most striking aspect. The large *place*, with its gleaming buildings round it, was a lake of transparent shadow, dotted with countless gas-lamps, and full of the vague whispers of fountains and human life. On one side flared the hotel they had lately quitted ; on another the great casino, pale like a skeleton from globes of electric light. On another, where the buildings were lower and more broken, tall palms might be seen, with their plumes in the

clear sky; and beyond were balustrades of marble, and spaces of dark sea: whilst behind and in grim contrast rose the barren towering mountains, and dwarfed the world at the foot of them into a small cluster of fire-flies.

Lord Surbiton had been on the watch to attract Miss Walters's attention, and he now saw his opportunity.

'This place,' he said as he fixed his eyes on her, 'always seems to me like the moral sewer of Europe—a great drain's mouth open at the foot of the hills. There is a tragic irony even in its loveliness.'

'Tragic or not,' said the Duchess, 'we have had a most amusing dinner here; haven't we, Mrs. Grantly? Though I'm sure I've forgotten by this time what it was we were talking about.'

'A proof,' said Lord Surbiton, 'of how well your Grace was conversing. True conversation is like good champagne. It ex-

hilarates for the moment, but next morning we feel no trace of it.'

Vernon here broke silence. 'If true conversation,' he said, 'is like good champagne, true love is like bad. False and true love may seem just the same when we taste them. We only detect the true when we find that our head aches afterwards.'

'That,' said Lord Surbiton, still looking towards Miss Walters, 'is why a serious passion is so great an educator. But its work only begins when the pain it causes has left us. Strong present feeling narrows our sympathies; strong past feeling enlarges them. Thus a woman of the world always should have been, but should never be, in love. She should always have had a grief: she should never have a grievance.'

'Why,' asked Miss Walters coldly, 'do you say this of a woman of the world especially?'

‘ Because it is only in the world, or in what we call society, that intercourse with our fellows is really a completed fine art. It there *is* what elsewhere it only pretends to be. Men who profess to think gravely or to have grave ends speak of society as the type of what is vain and frivolous. Perhaps they are right—who knows? Yet society is the logical end of the whole of this world’s civilisation; and of all the follies that I ever set any store by, fashion is the one I could still find most to say for. Fashion,’ he continued, ‘is the daintiest form of fame, and sometimes of power also; and were it only as wide and lasting as it is delicate, it would unite in itself the objects of all human ambitions.’

‘ Are the objects of ambition,’ said Miss Walters, ‘ the chief objects of life? ’

‘ Men in general,’ said Lord Surbiton, ‘ are the puppets of three forces—ambition, love, and hunger; but love destroys the

appetite; ambition destroys love; and fashion absorbs, or at any rate sways, ambition.'

These general maxims did not much delight the Duchess, and she betrayed at this juncture that her thoughts had been somewhat wandering.

'Captain Grantly!' she exclaimed, 'I wonder whose are those horses that are waiting there at the door of the casino—the pair of greys, I mean, in that rather smart-looking carriage. I watched them drive round, five minutes ago; and the near one, do you know, is really a first-rate stepper.'

This profane interruption put a stop to Lord Surbiton's eloquence, for Miss Walters turned round, and began to look at the horses: whilst her aunt, hearing a railway whistle, consulted her watch, and said they must soon be moving. 'However,' she added, 'there must be plenty of time yet, as

Colonel Stapleton said he would come and see us safe to the station.'

'I, too,' said Vernon, 'am reminded to think of moving; for I see my carriage is already there waiting for me.'

'What!' said the Duchess, 'and is that fine turn-out yours, Mr. Vernon? Well, here's luxury for a young man of thirty!'

'By Gad, my dear chap, you *are* a swell,' said Captain Grantly, putting his hand on Vernon's shoulder.

Wealth has a certain power over those even who are least touched by it. It calls their attention to the man possessing it, if only to make it worth their while to despise him; and Vernon knew in an instant that Miss Walters turned to glance at him. Once again he was about to attempt speaking to her, when he was interrupted by the arrival of Colonel Stapleton.

'Here's a go!' cried the Colonel, panting

and out of breath, ' I've been looking for you, Lady Walters, for the last twenty minutes ; and now your train's gone, and you must stop the night here. If you'll let me, I'll get you rooms directly at the Hôtel de Paris. The Princesse de —— and the Prince for the time being have just cleared out unexpectedly ; so I know they can take you in, and we'll show Miss Cynthia a little more of the life here.'

' If you stop, you know,' said the Duchess, ' there is my maid who can look after you. I can lend you almost everything ; and you can buy a tooth-brush here.'

Miss Walters turned to Colonel Stapleton with a hasty frown. ' No—no,' she said ; ' let us do anything rather than that. This place is perfectly unendurable.'

Vernon observed her closely, and with extreme surprise. She spoke in a manner that would have been rudeness to any common acquaintance even of long standing, but the

Colonel, strange to say, was not in the least abashed by it ; he only eyed her with a look of quiet amusement. ‘Come, little vixen,’ he whispered, ‘don’t be naughty. I’m sure Aunt Louisa will give her vote for staying.’

But Lady Walters wished to do no such thing ; and she was already inquiring nervously if there would be any difficulty in getting a carriage. ‘Come,’ said Miss Walters, taking hold of Colonel Stapleton’s sleeve, ‘be good, and go and tell her about it. We mean to go somehow, so you may as well make yourself of use to us.’

He was forestalled, however, by Captain Grantly, who had at once volunteered to go off to the livery-stables, and was just starting when he was recalled by the practical Duchess. ‘You may as well find out first,’ she said, ‘where it is Lady Walters wants to be driven to ; for at this time of night they will often refuse to take you.’

‘Oh!’ said Lady Walters, somewhat troubled by this, ‘it is to the Cap de Juan. It is a long way by the road, I’m afraid. Perhaps, after all, we had better remain here.’

Vernon felt all the blood rush at once to his face; and for a moment his heart stopped beating.

‘The Cap de Juan!’ exclaimed the Duchess; ‘why that settles everything. Come Mr. Vernon, now is your opportunity. My dear Lady Walters, here is a young man with a carriage and horses ready, who is only too anxious to take you back to your very door-step.’

A rapid look of annoyance passed over Miss Walters’ face. ‘We couldn’t think,’ she said, with a cold politeness, ‘of taking Mr. Vernon’s horses so great a distance. He is hardly aware, perhaps, of the journey there is before us.’

‘On the contrary,’ said Vernon, ‘I am

particularly well aware of it, for it is the very journey that is also before me. If I am not much mistaken, we are all but next-door neighbours. Your house, I think, must be the Château St. John; and, if so, our two gardens touch each other.'

After this there was nothing more to be said. Circumstances had at length played into Vernon's hands; and another caprice in his life was to be at least partially gratified.

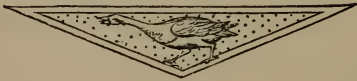
'Well,' said the Duchess, as the carriage drove off, 'I'm glad Mr. Vernon has got what he wanted, though Miss Cynthia, at first, was, I must say, very snubby to him. However, one can never judge by this. Perhaps, when we go to the Cap de Juan, we shall find them an engaged couple. Who knows?'

'I know,' said Mrs. Grantly, 'and I'll bet you anything we shall not. A man like Mr. Vernon will never marry. He's exactly,' she added, dropping her voice, 'like a younger

edition of Lord Surbiton; and I guess they're a couple of shams—the two of them.'

'I think,' said the Duchess, 'that Mr. Vernon is charming.'

'Yes—to know,' said Mrs. Grantly, 'but not to depend upon.'





CHAPTER VI.

VERNON and his friends were meanwhile hastening homewards. Lady Walters had addressed to him a few kind civilities, eyeing him the while with a look of trustful friendliness ; but her niece had hardly said anything, and the three soon sank into silence. Every influence, indeed, seemed to persuade to it—the easy motion of the carriage, the rhythmic tramp of the horses, the soft fanning of the night air, and the pageant of sea and mountain that was sweeping past them like a dream. Here was a gaudy villa, surmounted by a huge coronet,

the home of some Russian gambler ; here, with domes and minarets, a dwelling yet more fantastic. Scents of flowers blew down to them from the gardens ; and over the garden walls hung spiked aloes and cactuses. Then presently the scene grew wilder. On the right, wooded gorges slanted up into the mountains ; and on the left, the sea below them broke into fairy bays. All this seemed to absorb Miss Walters ; and her eyes being thus occupied, Vernon was able unobserved to observe her. He had once remarked in one of his more delicate moods, that a woman whose dress is the perfection of fashion, is never herself the perfection of real refinement. But he now felt inclined to modify this judgment. The vanities of this world seemed, on the girl before him, as natural as its own petals to some delicate hot-house flower ; so that she was as little troubled by their possession as the saint is who has renounced them.

‘The effect of her presence,’ he wrote that night in his diary, ‘was at once charming and singular. It did not at first concentrate my thoughts on herself; but it moved like a wind amongst them, and stirred them in all directions. Vague aspirations of many kinds awoke in me. I longed in grotesque rotation to make poetry, to ride hard, and to pray; and when something roused the aunt, and between two sleeps she talked a little to me, I was annoyed and jarred by having the silence broken.’

Lady Walters, it is true, had begun somewhat abruptly. ‘What a pity it is,’ she said, as though following up some train of thought of her own, ‘that poor Jack Stapleton never married! He is naturally such a kind, good creature. It is self-indulgence that has ruined him.’

‘And do you think,’ said Vernon, ‘that marriage will always save a man?’

‘Not always,’ she said, ‘and it never affects a man as it does a woman. Yet some men, Mr. Vernon, are ruined for the want of it—often those with the warmest and sweetest natures. You know the man that his friends call a *good fellow*—who, like a sunflower always turns towards happiness. If such a man has a wife he cares for, he will live that he may make her happy ; but if left to himself, shall I tell you what will happen to him ? He will live, not to give pleasure but to find it ; and to like consorting with happy people is a very different thing from trying to make people happy.’

‘Perhaps you are right,’ said Vernon with a slight involuntary sigh. ‘But how should you say that marriage affected women ?’

‘Ah !’ said Lady Walters, ‘in another way entirely. When a woman marries with affection her whole character changes. She grows absorbed in the things that absorb her hus-

band ; and, through him, they become really a new life to her.'

'If I thought of marrying,' said Vernon, 'it would be with a different hope. I should hope to find a wife, who, if she had my tastes at all, had had them before she knew me ; and that her already possessing them were a cause of her sympathy ; not that her acquiring them for my sake were the signs of it. I should like her life to stand on its own basis ; and in her pursuits I should like to have a constant rival, that should keep my affection fresh with a kind of stingless jealousy.'

Lady Walters smiled at him incredulously, with half-closed eyes. 'I am afraid, Mr. Vernon,' she said, 'you've never been in love yet.' Then the conversation dropped ; and it was soon evident that she had again fallen asleep. Vernon was pleased to have been able to talk in Miss Walters' hearing, since

he found her so difficult of direct access ; and he now fancied that she looked a little less coldly at him. Presently she asked him of her own accord the name of some place they were passing. He answered her question ; but he found he could get no farther. In spite of himself he was still embarrassed in her presence. The remembrance that her first sight of him had been in the middle of his foolish scene with the Frenchwoman, abased him in his own estimation : he was in a thoroughly wrong position. He leaned his head back, and looked up at the stars, and was soon completely lost in another deep reverie. All of a sudden the tenor of his thoughts betrayed itself. He broke out aloud with a single line from *Hamlet* :—

Oh, what a rogue and peasant slave am I !

He spoke the words abstractedly, and for a second or two seemed not to know he had uttered them. Then he recollected himself,

and there might have been an awkward moment, if Miss Walters with ready tact had not come to the rescue.

‘ I know that line so well,’ she said ; ‘ but I can’t remember where it comes from.’

‘ It is from *Hamlet*,’ said Vernon, ‘ a play I know by heart ; and I often catch myself repeating bits aloud from it.’

With this there ensued a little conversation about Shakespeare, then about poetry generally ; and matters very soon were proceeding more smoothly. Vernon had once again found his footing. His thoughts, his feelings, and his words began to flow freely as usual ; and when he looked into Miss Walters’ eyes he found she did not avert them. The character of the drive in a single instant changed for him ; and it quickly became as delightful as it had been disappointing hitherto. To all intents and purposes he was alone with this fair stranger ; and she

was visibly now beginning to take a certain interest in him. Gradually, too, he became aware that her presence had some magnetic effect upon him. Her hand, her lips, her eye, even the soft furs on her jacket, and the faint perfume from her handkerchief touched his being, and made the blood in his veins tingle: whilst at the same time all in him that was most refined or delicate, seemed suddenly to be coming uppermost under the attraction of her presence. The moral recoil from the low and frivolous to whatever was pure and delicate, was in itself a pleasing shock to the intellectual voluptuary: whilst the sense that he had to efface a bad impression gave double earnestness to his efforts to create a good one. To a man of Vernon's temperament an experience of this kind was a luxury.

And yet, on his part, there was no acting or insincerity. His goodness, to say the least

of it, was as genuine as his evil ; and his voice, his look, and his manner, as he now spoke to Miss Walters, were all instinct with a chivalrous and a quite natural reverence.

‘ I am so glad,’ he said at last, ‘ that I happened to have my carriage, and was able to take you away from that horrid place there.’

‘ If you think the place horrid,’ she said gently, ‘ why do you go yourself to it ?’

‘ One might ask, I am afraid, that question about many things. I went there to-day for distraction—to escape from my own company. It did well enough to distract me : but one wishes to shake the dust off one’s feet afterwards.’

‘ Like my question,’ she said, ‘ that will apply to many things. But are you living quite alone out here ?’

‘ Yes,’ said Vernon, ‘ with no company but my books and thoughts ; and, though I

came here on purpose to be with these, I am glad sometimes to escape from them. I had hoped to have brought a friend with me; indeed, perhaps he may still come. The best escape from one's thoughts is a friend one is really fond of.'

'That is hardly a flattering light,' she said, 'in which to regard a friend. There are some unhappy people whose only chance of peace lies in forgetting themselves; but such people, I believe, have made themselves unfit for friendship. I look on a friend as a person who will help one to find, not to lose, oneself. If you want to lose yourself, you should always live in society, and agree with Lord Surbiton that life's highest reward is fashion.'

'Are you then,' said Vernon, 'not fond of society?'

'Of course for happy people society is a healthy thing; but how one mixes in it

depends on one's own character. One can be the fashion, and yet not be oneself a fashionable, as one sees in the case of many of the greatest people in London. I may myself have been less in the world, perhaps, than most women of my age ; but still I have seen plenty of smart society ; indeed, I have several relations who seem to live for nothing else : and, so far as I can tell, nothing hardens the heart like fashion. To a genuine fine lady—who is a very different person, by the way, from a *grande dame*—it is a thing next to impossible to value character rightly.'

'And yet many of the qualities,' said Vernon, 'that secure most applause in society, are the fruits, as Lord Surbiton told us, of some deeper life in the past. Take singing, for instance : what an effect real expression has!—and to express feeling in song, the singer must himself have felt.'

'Perhaps so ; and for that very reason

the most touching singing has sometimes almost disgusted me. What a use to make of some buried and sacred sorrow, to conjure its ghost up that it may secure a drawing-room triumph for us !’

‘ One may, of course,’ said Vernon, ‘ exaggerate views like these, till they become false and fantastic. But I am quite sure you are right to some degree. To be always in society is to be always with mere acquaintances, and with acquaintances who like you for your least genuine qualities. I have met many a man, staying in country houses, who must have been sickened, as he went to bed, by what he had said or laughed at in the smoking-room ; and yet the night after he has done just the same. To be always in this way with the world, is to be always estranged from oneself ; and one’s true self, like other sensitive creatures, will in time die of neglect, or at least be ruined by it.

‘Do you remember,’ said Miss Walters, ‘what I said just now—that a true friend is a person with whom we can find, not lose ourselves? I,’ she went on, with a sigh and a slight shudder, ‘have had friends of two kinds—true and false; and they have both done all they could for me.’

She shuddered.

‘Are you cold?’ murmured Vernon, leaning forward and looking at her. ‘Let me put that shawl over your shoulders for you.’ No lover could have done the office with more tenderness, or at the same time with more respect. Then for a moment he laid his hand upon hers, and asked, ‘Are you warmer now?’ The look, the touch formed a new crisis in their relationship; and they both grew aware of this by a new tone in their voices. Vernon himself was surprised at what had passed. He had never thought she could have so softened towards him;

but he knew that it was so by her two words as she thanked him. And now with a soft sensation, he felt his heart expanding; and grave and secret thoughts welled up to his lips, and began to demand utterance. Should he go on and utter them, fixing his eyes on hers? To do so, he knew, would be an exquisite self-indulgence. It would be like a passionate mental kiss to the beautiful creature opposite him. But for a moment he vacillated; and there was a short moral struggle in him. Had he the right intention that could make that kiss lawful? Might not the very feelings he wished to express be wronged by his then expressing them? Was such mental passion as this, with its spasm of self-abandonment, in reality much better than its coarser physical counterpart? Conscience, however, was weak, and was swept aside by impulse.

‘Shall I tell you,’ he said, ‘why I have

come out here? I have lost my self, and I wish to find it again. I wish to see how I stand with my conscience, and to know what I really value. This is a task in which no friend can help one; one must enter into one's own chamber and be still, for it. At present, it seems to me sometimes that I hardly have a self; but I feel, like a man in a dream, that I am being swept passively through changing states of consciousness. Some may be pleasant enough, some dull and dreary; but they are all shadowy things; I have no abiding part in them, nor is one bound by any chain to the other. I seem to be swept through them, just as we in this carriage are being swept through this ghostly landscape. What I want is, to wake myself from this idle dream of the world, and to get back again to the realities I was once familiar with. Such a waking is a long, weary process; and a friend's presence may soothe one in it though

he cannot help it forward. Is that,' he said, looking at her, 'is that a wrong view of friendship?'

'It is not my view,' she said, 'but no one can answer for another. If I had to seek a self that was lost, I should like to have a friend with me.'

'To encourage you, yes : but not to share your labour. You, for instance, could not re-arrange my life for me ; and yet it is a great help to me, even this little talk I have had with you. You and I are near neighbours now. Do you think we shall ever become friends?'

She gave him for the moment no direct answer, but murmured half abstractedly, 'I wonder how far you have wandered.'

'That,' said Vernon, 'is what I want to find out myself.'

After this there was a pause, whilst the two sank back into their own reflections, and

the changing fields and trees, as the carriage hurried onwards, surrounded and swept away from them.

Miss Walters at length began again. 'Perhaps you are surprised,' she said with a faint smile, 'at hearing me talk so decidedly about the world, and society, and friendship.'

'You certainly talk,' said Vernon, 'as if you had had experience.'

'I *have* had experience,' she said. 'I have had much—too much—of it. I have been a gambler, amongst other things. I won more than two thousand pounds once at *trente et quarante*. Do you think that was very nice of me?' And she fixed her eyes on him with a look which he could not fathom. 'You see, if I hate Monte Carlo, it is not because gambling has ruined me. And now,' she went on, 'I am going to say one thing more, which sounds also like the maxim of a

rather experienced person. It is an answer to what you asked me just now. I have little belief, as a rule, in friendships between men and women—I mean when both the people concerned have youth and imagination. One or the other gets generally more or less than was bargained for.'

'I shall be thankful,' said Vernon, 'for the very least you will give me. You would find me a very safe person. A man's days of friendship begin when his days of love are over; and I,' he went on, knowing that he was making love all the time, 'am in my days of friendship.'

'You and I then, perhaps, are exceptions to the general rule. There are exceptions. I can at least say this much for myself, that I am far more likely to be a friend than to have one.'

She said this with a curious unconscious bitterness that perplexed and startled Vernon.

‘You must let me show you,’ he murmured, ‘that you are wrong there.’

She paused, and then said abruptly, ‘I hope you didn’t mistake me. I didn’t mean that I thought you would fall in love with me. Perhaps you are just as safe from that sort of thing as I am.’

‘You are very young,’ said Vernon, ‘to be talking in that way.’

‘Youth and age,’ she said, ‘should not be counted by years. No nun dying a living death in a nunnery could be more shut out from all danger of love than I am—from all hope and from all fear of it.’

After this there was silence, till Lady Walters woke up, and Vernon soon afterwards was saying adieu to his friends on their own door-step.

But the night was not yet done for him. He had refused to enter ; he was anxious to be by himself again ; and, having sent his

carriage away, he walked back through the gardens. In his own lamp-lit villa a delicate supper was prepared for him, but he did nothing more than taste it, and he went out again into the mellow night air. He was like a man who had eaten a sort of moral opium, and his breast was full of a sweet, fantastic tumult. There was a magical resurrection in him of the wild romance of boyhood. He leaned his elbow on a pale glistening balustrade, and looked out over the sea. 'Sea of Romance,' his unuttered thoughts began in him, 'once again you have your old charm for me. Inarticulate whispers of ambition, of passion, and of music float up to me from your enchanted surface. Sea of Southern moon and of Italian twilights, what eyes of famous lovers have looked out on you! The most musical of the world's love-songs have mixed over you with the vesper breezes! Pale, restless waves, rocking under

the stars of midnight, the limbs of the mermaids know you: the nautilus floats upon your bosom! Yes, and in me, too, up from the depths of my being, thoughts and longings are rising that sing like mermaids. What do they sing of? Is it of her eyes and lips? Are they singing to her spirit that it may stoop down to mine?' He turned back to his garden. That, too, was enchanted. Were Oberon and Titania holding revel there? Bush and blossom seemed populous with airy presences. Every passion, every pleasure of his life, became a separate fairy, with its body some faint perfume, and its dwelling-place some half-closed flower-bell. In luxurious agitation he again returned to his sea-view. Far away over the waters the lights of Nice were glittering fair and distant like a braid of golden stars. On a little headland near him, covered with myrtles, another light twinkled, solitary, dim, and only

just distinguishable. It came from a shrine of the Virgin, and his wandering gaze fixed on it. Suddenly into his dream-world there floated scents of incense, glimmering altars, and sounds of imploring music. 'Star of the sea,' he murmured, 'star of the morning, refuge of sinners, pray for me!'

Going indoors, he sat down to his desk and wrote his diary of the day's proceedings. Miss Walters filled up a large space in it, and a fragment of what he said about her has been already quoted: but so hard is it to be honest to even a piece of paper, that he made no mention whatever of his qualms of conscience or his own self-accusations.



BOOK II.



CHAPTER I.

WHEN Vernon woke next morning some unlooked-for news awaited him. A fresh, delicious air stole through the open window, and fanned his cheek delicately as he lay thinking. He was enjoying the memory of his last night's adventure, which seemed to promise him a new life in his solitude, when his eye caught something which showed him he had overslept himself. This was a pile of letters on a table by his bedside ; and on top of the pile was one in the handwriting of Campbell. What

was his astonishment when he found that it was dated 'Cannes'!

'My dear Vernon,' ran the letter, 'when you see where I am, you will of course set about being angry with me; and at first sight no doubt I seem to deserve that you should be. A month ago, when you begged me to come abroad and to take a villa with you, I refused you steadily, once or twice a little brusquely; and this with no better excuse than that very poor one—my feelings. I said I did not feel up to it, and upon my word that was true, Vernon—bitterly, deeply true. I had no heart to travel, and, though you may smile when I say so, the wretchedness I then suffered was crushing me. But I am better now; life has been going a little more kindly with me. I can enjoy my dinner again sometimes; I can laugh at a joke sometimes. My pleasure in my books and pictures is returning to me; and now it has actually happened that

you find me abroad as my best chance of happiness. Here I am, doing the very thing by myself that I refused so churlishly to do with you. But I am coming over directly to see you, and make my peace with you; and you will perhaps put me up for a night. You will forgive me, I think, when I tell you all my story.'

Vernon was easily roused into the brightest animal spirits; nor did such sentiment as that of the night previous at all tend to interfere with them. Campbell's letter was like a burst of sunlight to him, and he smiled and whistled in his bath like any happy schoolboy. He immediately telegraphed, 'Come at once. I and my carriage shall fetch you at two o'clock.' He ordered his breakfast in the open air, at his favourite spot under the myrtles; and as he sat there with the liquid morning round him, food, he thought, had never tasted so well, nor nature looked so beautiful.

The friend he was thinking of was a very different man from himself. What had at first attracted the two was a certain delicate dilettanteism, and an indifference to the games and sports by which so many men's leisure is occupied. But deeper down in their character this likeness ended. Whereas Vernon was restless and loved the world, Campbell was shy and restful and inclined to solitude; and whereas Vernon had played with his affections, Campbell had kept his laid up in a napkin. There are passions, however, that lie near affection, although they are always ready to ruin it; and to these Campbell had yielded with a quite sufficient openness. He had even treated the questions involved in them with a certain ruthless humour, which was as coarse as that of Rabelais, and had in part been borrowed from it. But there had been a flavour of innocence even about his vices. They had never approached his

heart near enough to corrupt it; and now that at last it was really touched and troubled, he had told the fact to his friend with a simplicity almost childish.

This frankness and depth of feeling had been something of a riddle to Vernon. He had been not long quit of his own engagement when he heard of Campbell's love affair; and he had pitied his friend sincerely. He looked on him as caught in a trap he had himself just escaped from: and when he found that Campbell the lover interfered with Campbell the friend, the above feeling was intensified. But now as he sat at breakfast, with a volume of Horace beside him, he was happy in the thought that the lover's days were waning, and that the friend would be again restored to him. He had just lit a cigarette, and with a lazy smile was watching the silvery-blue smoke-wreaths as they rose and melted over him into the green myrtle shadows, when he

heard on the gravel the sound of a firm footstep, and, looking up, he saw Alic Campbell before him.

Nothing human could be brighter than a pleased greeting of Vernon's ; it had all the quick radiance of a pool in morning sunlight : and he felt as happy at this moment with his old friend as a child is with a new plaything. Campbell, too, for his part was glowing with glad excitement, though there was a pathetic tone in his voice, if Vernon had cared to note it. Campbell was, however, extremely hungry ; he was by no means indifferent to the minor pleasures of the table, and Vernon's breakfast was excellent. Food had the best effect on the lately dejected lover ; his laugh came gaily, his eye gleamed with humour. There is many a heartache that can be made to cease on occasion by the modest soothings of a good *pâté-de-foie-gras*.

‘Here,’ cried Vernon at last, ‘are two disciples of Horace; we have tried many philosophies, but we return to this at last.

Huc vina et unguenta et nimium breves
Flores amœnæ ferre jube rosæ,
Dum res et ætas et Sororum
Fila trium patiuntur atra.’

Campbell smiled, and asked for some more Burgundy.

‘My dear Alic,’ Vernon went on presently, ‘I wrote you a letter only yesterday, full of advice and prophecy: and now, strange to say, before you have got either, you have taken the one, and fulfilled the other. I described to you, too, all the charms of this nook of mine; but now, look about you, and enjoy it with your own eyes.’

Campbell looked about him in silent, but evident, admiration. He had been a considerable traveller, and his eyes had known the world’s fairest and most famous prospects; but he admitted frankly that till

now he had never seen such a paradise. Vernon was delighted; and filling a glass with wine, 'It will be a little island in our lives,' he said, 'the enchanted time we will spend here. We have both had our troubles it is true, but, after all, we are still young: and it seems to me on a day like this as if life could have no sorrow except from want of power to be happy enough. Look between those two palm trees at the hills with their misty amethyst. See the astounding blue above us against the green of the stone-pine! See how the living azure is cut by the yellow mimosa-blossom! The beauty of all this goes through and through me like some notes of a violoncello. It is a cry, like certain dance music, after some consummation of pleasure unknown to us. You can kiss, you can embrace a woman; and she can love you back again. But nature—you can't kiss the sea; you can't embrace the mountains. If

one could only see God, and break one's heart in praising Him, that perhaps might ease one.'

A servant here made a moment's interruption, carrying Campbell's only luggage—a hand-bag—and asking to know if it should be taken upstairs to a bedroom. 'Of course,' said Vernon; and then turning to Campbell, 'My dear Alic,' he went on, 'it is indeed a delight to think you are really here. It is a pleasure beyond hope. But tell me—is that little bag all you have brought over with you? You couldn't travel with so little luggage if you were married.'

'I admit,' said Campbell, smiling, 'that freedom has its advantages. One would lose a great deal in losing it.'

'One would lose,' said Vernon, 'all that makes life bearable, as you would soon have felt had your affairs gone otherwise. But about the rest of your luggage, if there's not

a very great deal of it, we might drive over to Cannes this afternoon, and bring it all back in the carriage.'

'My dear Vernon,' said Campbell, 'I have got all I want for the night; and I must be returning to Cannes to-morrow. Don't let us waste our one day in driving.'

'Our one day!' exclaimed Vernon. 'God bless my soul, what do you mean by one day? Why, you are going to stop here at least three weeks with me.'

'My dear fellow,' said Campbell very slowly, 'God knows I should like to stay with you; but it is not to be.' And he fixed his eyes upon Vernon with a wistful, serious tenderness—it might almost be called solemnity. It was quite plain that he was resolute.

This to Vernon was like a thunderbolt out of a clear sky. He was at once startled, bewildered, and disappointed.

'Not stay with me!' he exclaimed.

‘Why, what on earth do you mean, Alic? Even if you are still a little melancholy, as I can well believe you are, you will be surely far better here than moping about in holes and corners by yourself. Why can’t you stay?—tell me?’

When Campbell answered, his voice had almost sunk to a whisper, and he looked at Vernon with eyes that begged for sympathy. ‘Because,’ he said, ‘I have to go on to San Remo. I have to be there to-morrow. Vernon, my—my friend is there. This is the reason why I have come abroad. I may see her to-morrow evening; I think, at farthest, the morning after: and at one time or the other I shall receive my life or death at her hands.’

A sudden unwelcome light at last broke in upon Vernon. ‘*Her—her!*’ he said. ‘Why, what on earth are you talking about? It surely can’t be true that I have taken your

letter wrongly? I thought, when you told me your case was mending, that you simply meant that you had fallen out of love again, and that you saw that the marriage state was not a thing worth sighing over.'

Campbell eyed Vernon for a moment or two with a curious, sad amusement. 'You're an odd creature,' he at last said, smiling. 'You know something of the world; at least you have seen many men and women: and do you think that a man who has really loved a woman, can cast his love to the winds in the course of a single fortnight? What a strange notion you must have of the nature of human affection!'

Vernon, who had not only conceived such a thing quite possible, but who had in this case actually taken it for granted, received a sudden check from those grave words of his friend. He was not embarrassed by what he had said himself—he knew Campbell far too

well for that ; but he felt that to Campbell's mind he had betrayed a singular ignorance ; and the first thing that struck him was the absurdity of his own situation. A look came into his eyes that fully confessed his fault ; but it was the gleam of humour rather than a tear of contrition ; and his expression was not unlike that of a naughty child's, who has been caught for the fifth time committing some minor mischief. Campbell understood the expression perfectly ; but it neither pained nor chilled him.

‘I don't mind you laughing,’ he said. ‘True feeling can always stand being laughed at. Vernon’—and here his own voice sank low again—‘this love of mine has lain down with me and risen up with me for a whole year. I have become a new man since first it took possession of me.’

‘So it seems,’ said Vernon, ‘and a very much unhappier one.’

‘Yes,’ said Campbell simply, ‘it has made me very miserable. I was ill for several weeks.’ His lips quivered a little, and he raised his clear eyes upwards. His look, thought Vernon, was like a young saint’s in meditation. Something seemed in his mind which he was a little timid of uttering; but at last he again turned to Vernon. ‘I think all this trouble,’ he said, ‘has been bringing me nearer God.’

Vernon now began to realise that Campbell was really changed. Was this the Campbell who, but a single twelvemonth back, delighted to dwell laughingly on the coarsest side of passion, and used God’s name rarely except to give point to an epigram? Vernon saw the change, for he had keen moral perceptions; it oppressed him, and at the same time he respected it. Still, however, a faint hope lingered in him that Campbell might not be beyond repentance. He repeated

all the arguments he had before used in his letter, and added others of a more homely and practical nature. 'You have often told me,' he urged, 'about your own circumstances. You are a rich bachelor; you would be a poor husband. I have seen myself that you have always lived in luxury; and you have always travelled whenever the fancy seized you. Marriage would therefore mean to you, on your own showing, the complete loss of all your personal liberty. You would be fettered in every movement and almost in every thought of your life.'

'I know well,' said Campbell, 'all I should have to give up; and I value it as much, or nearly as much, as you do. I should have to give up many, many luxuries, which to me in my self-indulgence have till now seemed necessaries—mental necessaries as well as bodily. I should have to think about all sorts of little expenses—a thing I hate doing.'

As you say, my wings would be clipped for travelling. I could no longer drink the best Burgundy, or smoke the best cigars, or buy books with fine engravings in them. I should lose all this; but what I should gain would far—far outweigh it. All this is a riddle to you, Vernon; for you have never known affection.'

'You wouldn't say that, I can tell you,' replied Vernon, 'if you had seen me last night.' And he gave a short account, in a tone of reserved banter, of what he called his adventure with Miss Walters.

'Adventure!' repeated Campbell. 'Yes—that is just what you consider a love affair. With you, it is a little incursion into an enemy's country; and your aim is presently to get back safe again. But when any man loves truly, does he act or think like this? Was it an *adventure* for the Dolorous Mother when she saw her son die on Calvary?'

His high-strung state of feeling betrayed itself in every accent ; and Vernon at last realised that his friend was beyond his arguments. He put his hand kindly on Campbell's shoulder, and in a tone of compassion that was trying to rise to sympathy, 'My dear, dear fellow,' he said, 'whatever you wish for yourself, I wish. I should be very glad for you to be happy, even though I lost your old *you* by it.'

'Thank you,' said Campbell, smiling ; 'but, as time draws on, my hopes get very shadowy. I build only on some slight expression which my friend let drop about me to a third person, and it is more than possible that I quite deceive myself. I feel, in going on to San Remo, as if I were going to my own execution. By this time tomorrow perhaps I shall be the forlornest creature imaginable.'

'And in that case,' said Vernon, 'what

should you do then? You would come back to me, wouldn't you, and let me cheer you up a little?'

Campbell's whole expression altered; the lines of his mouth hardened. 'I know exactly what I should do,' he said. 'I have already faced the alternative. If necessary, I shall go straight off to Vienna, and shall find distraction in a complete course of sensuality. I am told that for a life of pleasure Vienna is the best of capitals.'

'Nonsense,' said Vernon sharply. 'You would do nothing of the kind.'

'I should,' replied Campbell. 'I was never in my life more serious. I have already settled the exact route I should travel by, and the hotel I should first put up at. I am a man of strong animal passions. I can easily make a complete beast of myself. Nothing in the world could deaden mental pain like that.'

‘Damn it!’ exclaimed Vernon with a sudden angry energy. ‘For God’s sake, Campbell, do talk like a rational being. It makes me sick to hear you speak in that way. A moment ago I had begun to admire and to envy you; and now you have spoilt all. Because some woman, it chances, does not love you, is that any reason why you should cease to respect yourself? Affection, you say, raises the soul to God; and, for aught I know, it may very possibly do so. But if you are crossed in love, does that make God valueless? Are your views about God dependent on a girl’s views about you? If your passion really raises you, it cannot let you plan debasing yourself. If in cold blood you can thus plan debasing yourself, then all I can say is, that I don’t think much of your passion.’

‘You would not be so hard,’ said Campbell meekly, ‘if you had ever felt as I feel.’

What a lover plans is never in cold blood. Half the vice in the world, Vernon, is caused less by sin than by sorrow. However,' he went on, his tone again softening, 'I didn't come here to croak my woes to you. Let us think about other things, and let us explore your paradise.'





CHAPTER II.

VERNON was charmed to escape to more indifferent subjects, and by a quick reaction Campbell became cheerful. The friends found plenty of small things to amuse and interest them. They went over the villa; they inspected books and etchings; they scrambled about on rocks; they walked through olive-groves; they climbed up a wooded hill, and examined a quaint old chapel. The chapel suggested a sudden thought to Vernon. 'Come,' he said, 'and let us look up Stanley.' The news that Stanley was in the neighbourhood was a fresh distraction for Campbell, and for the

time seemed quite to banish the unfortunate thoughts that saddened him. Stanley was living at a small, somewhat rough *pension*, that was not far from Vernon's villa. They learnt that he was at home ; and a prim little white-capped maid left them to announce themselves. They found him upstairs, in a small, bare sitting-room, bending over a table, writing. His face was fine and delicate ; but had contracted now a slightly stern expression, and suggested at once thought and physical suffering. When, however, he saw who were his visitors, his eyes lit up with a smile of such frank and surprised pleasure, that for a moment the sternness vanished ; and Vernon presently, though not without some mis-giving, asked him if he would come to dinner. To his surprise Stanley accepted gladly ; but added, ' If I come this evening, I must send you away now ; for I have certain work which I am obliged to finish to-day.'

‘Poor Stanley!’ said Vernon, as he and Campbell walked away together. ‘How delighted he was to see you, Alic! and I don’t think he much minded seeing me.’

‘On the contrary,’ said Campbell, ‘I thought he seemed particularly pleased at it. Why should you think he minded it?’

‘I don’t know; but I always vaguely fancy, if I haven’t wanted to see a man, that he hasn’t wanted to see me. Besides, I haven’t the least doubt that he thinks me rather a brute.’

‘Do you mean to say that’s the first time you’ve ever been to call on him?’

‘I’m afraid it is,’ said Vernon. ‘But I shall go again now. Do you know, it almost made me cry to see the pleased way in which he smiled at us. I am always touched when a man who looks stern is really made glad by a trifle. But I’ll tell you, my dear Alic, what our present business must be. We must order

some specially nice things for dinner this evening ; and I think, in spite of everything, we shall have a very happy little symposium.'

Nor, when dinner came, was this anticipation falsified. The unlooked-for re-union of the three old friends produced in each of them a genial glow of spirits. Stanley, whatever might be his private habits, betrayed at Vernon's table no trace of asceticism. He was naturally a moderate man ; but to-night at least he ate and drank what he wanted, and in a quite natural way he remarked that the champagne was good. Talk flowed freely about the early days at Oxford ; and memory lit up all of them with the reflected sunshine of youth. The only one whose spirits were at all forced or uncertain was Vernon himself. The thought that Campbell was resolved not to stay with him vexed him with a suppressed persistency ; and with this presently another began to mix itself—the thought of Miss

Walters, and the strange charm of her presence. It thus happened that at moments he would appear absent. But wine came to his aid whenever his will failed him, and drove his straying wits back to his guests and table.

When dinner was over, the three adjourned to the library, and Stanley and Campbell fell to discussing one of their college tutors. This was a man of great beauty of character, who, though somewhat rough externally, had had upon all his pupils the most powerful moral influence; and the mention of him led the talkers to other serious matters. Vernon at the beginning had occasionally put in a word or two; but he had relapsed gradually into a mere listener—a listener at first attentive, then a trifle drowsy; till at length, by gentle stages, he had sunk off into sleep.

The tone of the others presently dropped lower.

‘Look!’ said Stanley, as his eyes fell upon Vernon, ‘what a curious expression in repose he has! He is the most careworn sleeper I ever saw, and yet of all waking men he is the most careless-looking. Do you think he is happy?’

‘He has his troubles,’ said Campbell, ‘no doubt, like the rest of us. To make him happy, he wants one or two things—he should have less of a heart, or more of one. Somebody, I remember, once said of him bitterly, that he got more love from his slightest friend than he ever gave to his greatest. Perhaps there is some truth in that: and yet, though the man who said it is one of the most staunch of creatures, I could depend on Vernon in some ways more surely than on him. Were there any urgent need, I could ask Vernon to take any trouble for me. He would hate the trouble, yet all the same he would take it; and he would serve you better, when the

service was only a nuisance to him, than many men would who might feel it a genuine pleasure.'

'That just fits in,' said Stanley, 'with what I heard the other day about him, from an old woman here, whose cottage I sometimes visit. This woman had a poor, lame child, who was taken out in a mule-cart, with some of its brothers and sisters. The cart broke down, and could not be brought home again ; and the little cripple was naturally in great distress. Vernon that moment chanced to be passing by. He at once took it up and carried it two miles, to its home, and the day after ordered a boot with steel supports for it, which the surgeons declare will give it the use of its legs again. I happened to meet him just after he had done carrying it, and he said, "Don't shake hands with me ; I've been touching a beastly child!"'

'Have you ever looked at his books?'

asked Campbell presently, as he glanced round him.

‘No ; I have never been in this room before. He asked me to breakfast once, but I was unable to come, and I gathered by his manner that he thought he had done his duty by me.’

‘His library,’ said Campbell, ‘made me smile rather. A good half of it consists of dry treatises on theology. Look at his writing-table,’ he went on. ‘Do you see those three books on it—one on top of the other ? I took them up before dinner, and they are “Horace,” “The Spiritual Combat,” and “Lord Chesterfield’s Letters.”’

‘I remember that at Oxford,’ said Stanley, ‘he would continually talk of theology ; but it was never with any reverence, though sometimes with thought and knowledge.’

‘Yes ; religion with him,’ said Campbell, ‘is merely an intellectual question—a tiresome

riddle, that piques him because he can't answer it.'

The conversation continued for some time longer, whilst the subject of it still slept heavily. At last Stanley, who kept early hours, declared that he ought to go. 'But I won't wake Vernon,' he said. 'Poor fellow, he looks tired enough. You shall say good-night for me; and I hope, Campbell, that I may soon see you again.'

'I am going to-morrow,' said Campbell. 'I am obliged to go; but, if you would be in, I might come and see you in the morning. I, too, have my troubles; and I am afraid I have been boring Vernon with them.'

By and by Vernon woke up with a start, and asked where was Stanley. 'What a brute I must have seemed to him!' he said, when he knew that his guest was gone. 'I ask a fellow to dine with me; then I sleep like a pig all through the evening; and now

for my pains, I wake up with a splitting headache. Let us go out—shall we?—and take a turn in the garden.’

Vernon was somewhat silent as they went through the moonlit walks. At last he said abruptly, ‘What made me sleepy to-night was my having taken too much wine. I did it to keep my spirits up, for I was gloomy about your going. Of course Stanley wouldn’t say anything; but I know quite well he must have thought me a beast.’

‘That,’ said Campbell, ‘I am quite sure he did not, for just before he went he was warmly praising you. He was telling me of your kindness to some little crippled girl.’

‘My kindness to what?’ exclaimed Vernon. ‘Oh, I know what he must be thinking of. Poor little dirty brat—she literally reeked of garlic! How the devil did Stanley hear about it? But now tell

me,' he went on, 'must you really go to-morrow? Is it all quite decided? Can't you stay even for a day or two, and let me show you my beautiful neighbour?'

Campbell shook his head. 'No, Vernon—no,' he said.

'But she is very beautiful,' said Vernon, 'and dresses exquisitely, and has all kinds of high-minded views about the hollowness of fashion, and about genuine friendship, and falling in love, and so on. I would let you flirt with her, if you wanted to.'

'You forget,' said Campbell, 'that I am leading a consecrated life.'

'Well, she won't un-consecrate you. She has done with love, she tells me: though I'm not sure myself if I quite believe her. Is it Sterne—or who is it?—who says, "Talking of love is making it?"'

Campbell was silent, and Vernon began again.

‘ I think my true *métier*,’ he said, ‘ would be that of wooer-in-ordinary to my male friends. Whenever any one of them had set his heart on a lady, it should be my business to awake her love and tenderness ; to teach her lips to kiss, her breast to move with a sigh or two, and her eyes to look expressively. Then without any peculation I would transfer my complete prize to my client. Would you on these terms have made me your agent ? You may be sure when the time came I should have no temptation to cheat you.’

This was said with a smile ; but Campbell answered in a tone of unexpected seriousness.

‘ My dear Vernon,’ he said, ‘ what a thoroughly immoral man you are !’

‘ Immoral !’

‘ Yes ; you really are. I am not in the least joking. You are one of the most im-

moral men I ever knew. What you said just now is only another proof of it.'

'My dear fellow,' said Vernon, 'I was only chaffing you.'

'Yes; but the man in jest is the key to the man in earnest. Besides, I didn't judge you merely by what you said just now. I have known you for ten years, and have been your friend ever since I knew you. I was looking only this morning at one of your early photographs, and since that was taken I can see how your face has changed. In some ways you have hardly aged at all; you still look very, very young. But youth is sometimes prolonged by a sacrifice of all that is best in it; and ah, Vernon, there is one look gone from your face which that photograph reminded me was once there! And shall I tell you what has destroyed it? It is what I call your immorality. It is this perpetual trifling with your highest and finest

feelings. That the feelings are high and fine I don't deny for a moment. It is in that that the badness lies. You are making a playground of what should be your holy of holies. You may not be indulging your grosser appetites ; but you are making yourself incapable for ever of any earnest affection ; and this is the surest way in which you can quench the Spirit. It is not eclipsing the light, as lust does ; it is putting the light out. Pure affection can extinguish lust ; but if you extinguish pure affection, what then ? Would a man who has done that ever be fit for heaven, even though in the world's sense of the word he were as moral as any anchorite ?'

There was something in Campbell's manner which, despite his plain speaking, made Vernon listen without anger or impatience. He seemed a little annoyed, however, and anxious to change the subject.

‘Heaven!’ he said wearily; ‘and do you, Campbell, really believe in heaven?’

‘More than you do,’ said Campbell, with the same gentleness. ‘I am not wanting to preach to you. I am only trying, like a friend that loves you, to show you the reason of your being so ill at ease. This is a delicate thing to do, and even a friend can do it only when he is himself feeling deeply. A year ago I could never have spoken like this to you. Perhaps six weeks hence I shall be again unable to do it.’

‘I know you mean kindly,’ said Vernon. ‘But, honestly, I didn’t quite understand you. What on earth makes you think that I am ill at ease?’

‘You are, though you may not acknowledge it. I can see it in your face, I can hear it in your voice sometimes. With all your bright spirits, and with all your gaiety, you have done your nature a wrong which you

feel in spite of yourself. My own sins, God knows, have been many. It is perhaps because of them that all this sorrow is come upon me. But there is something worse, Vernon, than even the garment spotted by the flesh. What is commonly called immorality, does indeed stain life ; but *your* immorality eviscerates it. It leaves you a husk—a shell ; a tissue it may be of supersensitive nerves ; but with no true self within to be informed by them. You have not arrived at that state yet, but there are moments when you feel or fear the beginning of it.'

' I may have causes for care,' said Vernon, ' other than you dream of ; perhaps, indeed, of an exactly opposite nature. You tell me I do not believe in heaven, and perhaps I don't ; but at least I feel daily the want of a belief in it. My unhappiness, if I have any, arises not from having no woman to love, but from having no God to believe in.'

Campbell looked at Vernon with a friendly incredulity. 'My dear Vernon,' he said, 'you are the most irreligious man I know. The same course of conduct that deadens human love deadens divine love also; nor indeed would you play with the first, if you had any real sense of the second. I know quite well that you think about religion, and read about it; but you know quite well also that it is not an active power in your life. It is nothing more than an abstraction. You have continually told me that nothing in life absorbs you, whereas religion, when a reality, is all an affair of loving.'

'Not of loving only, but of believing also. You can't love a being whose existence you are not sure of; and it is quite conceivable—I am not speaking about myself, for that, after all, is a matter of little interest—it is quite conceivable that affection may in many cases be chilled by want of belief, just as

belief may become useless for want of proper affection. Love robbed of belief is like a bird whose nest has been stolen. It tries every tree, but finds no twig to rest upon.' There was a short silence after this; and then presently Vernon began again. 'In one point at least,' he said with a cold laugh, 'you are wrong, Campbell, in your judgment of me. You said that religion had no effect on my life. It was a religious question that caused the breaking off of my marriage.'

'If you had been very much in love, if you had been very anxious to marry, would that question have stood in your way?'

'It would have stood in my way, I sincerely hope, in any case. I can think of no self-indulgence so wanton, so complete in its cruelty, as bringing children into the world, and giving them no faith to guide them. It would indeed be making a tragic toy of affection, to let it lead one into blowing soap-

bubbles of conscious fretful vanity. Happy unconscious matter ! The man is worse than a murderer who informs it with aimless wretchedness.'

'And this,' said Campbell, 'is the religious man's view of fatherhood ! My dear Vernon, you have much to learn yet.'

Vernon made no reply to this. He had seen that Campbell, in spite of a friend's fondness, had but a scanty faith in his conduct with regard to the breaking off of his marriage ; and a feeling of not quite unnatural anger had begun to swell up in him. But 'He means well,' he almost directly said to himself, and he forced the anger down. Its only outer sign was a few moments' coldness ; and when next he spoke, it was once more with sympathy.

'You have told me much about love,' he said, as they moved back to the villa ; 'but you have told me very little about your own

love-story. You met your goddess abroad ; she has very simple tastes ; “ first she would and then she wouldn’t,” and now she is doubtful whether she will or no. I knew this much, but that is all. Do you mind telling me her name, and a little more about her ? ’

‘ Not to-night,’ said Campbell. ‘ No—nor to-morrow morning, I think. Had I better or surer hope, I would dwell on and tell you everything. But I can’t now. I can’t go over those scenes again. I would sooner not even tell you who she is, unless I can tell you some day that she is or will be my wife. I shall know that soon. Ah, me ! ’

‘ And are you still resolved,’ said Vernon, ‘ that Vienna is your only alternative ? ’

‘ Perhaps,’ said Campbell sighing, ‘ I am not resolved that it shall be ; but I know that it is.’

The conversation then turned to brandy and seltzer-water, and the two friends retired.



CHAPTER III.

CAMPBELL next morning paid a short visit to Stanley, and in the afternoon he was gone. Vernon's last words to him were, 'If you are not successful, come back to me, and give up Vienna. You have told me pretty plainly that I'm not far off from a devil; so if it's the devil you want to go to, you may at least choose one who is fond of you.'

There was more in his manner, perhaps, than he was altogether conscious of; for this last farewell of his touched Campbell and set him for some time thinking. As for Vernon

nimself, his spirits at first sank low enough, and his villa looked very blank to him. But he was not a man tamely to sit down with dejection; and, having mourned his friend's loss for an hour or so, his imagination suddenly wheeled round to Miss Walters. The effect was as quick on him as that of a glass of absinthe. He would at once hurry off and call at the Château St. John; and such a thrill did the prospect send through him, that he felt his present solitude was not without its advantages. Even a friend like Campbell might have been perhaps a little *de trop* just then.

He had rung the bell at the Château; the hall door had been thrown open, and with a confident inquiry he was already on the point of entering, when the servant informed him that the ladies had left for Nice.

‘Left!’ echoed Vernon in astonishment.

‘They left yesterday, sir,’ said the servant; ‘but they will be back early this evening, as

I believe they are expecting a gentleman here to dine with them.'

Vernon at once concluded that this gentleman must be himself, and he resolved to hasten home to inquire if no note had arrived for him. He was spared, however, this trouble by the servant adding the next moment, 'A gentleman, I believe, sir, who is coming from Monte Carlo.'

This simple announcement worked like magic on Vernon. A sudden twilight of jealousy fell on his whole soul; and at the same instant the stars of romance shone out again. The expected guest, he felt convinced, could be none other than Colonel Stapleton; and the thought that the beautiful Cynthia could be touched by so gross a rival, seemed to withdraw her to some untold distance. But such are the ways of certain kinds of affection, that this fancied distance only increased his longing for her. His impressions

of her, mental or sensuous, became all more vivid than ever, and he was soon lost in a deep, passionate reverie. Her eyes, her lips, her hands, the texture of her cheek and throat, the feather in her hat, the tones of her voice, her gestures—all these in their several ways touched him ; and she dwelt in his mind as some strange, delicate mystery that he was resolved to make his own.

Having indulged to the full in this kind of dreaming, the thought of Campbell once more came back to him. He paced the same walks that evening that Campbell had lately paced with him ; and he attentively thought over their last night's conversation, and looked longingly in the direction of the Château St. John. ' Ah me ! ' he cried, ' and am I really the brute that Campbell tells me I. am ? Am I really heartless and selfish, and with no health left in me ? '

He went indoors to his library ; and took

down a volume from his book-case of Latin authors. He sat for some time poring over it motionless ; but at last a low voice broke from him, and he began thus translating aloud to himself :—

‘ Highest and holiest, mightiest and almightiest, most pitiful and yet most just, unseen and yet ever near to us, fairest and yet most firm, ever before us and yet past our studying ; never new, never aging, yet renewing all things ; striking the proud with age, and they know it not : whose work never ceases, whose quiet is never broken ; gathering, yet nothing needing ; sustaining, replenishing, and protecting ; making, cherishing, and maturing ; seeking, yet having all things : Thou lovest, and passion stirs Thee not ; Thou art jealous, and lo ! no care touches Thee ; Thou repentest Thee, yet Thou has no contrition ; Thou art angry, and yet Thou abidest calm ; Thou makest Thy

works change, but Thy counsel endures for ever ; Thou findest what Thou hast never lost, and Thou takest it back home to Thee. Thou art never in want, and yet Thou art pleased with winning ; Thou hast no covetousness, and yet Thou takest usury. Thou art paid more than Thy due that Thou mayest be made man's debtor ; and who has aught that has not been always Thine ? Thou payest, yet owest no man anything ; Thou givest gifts, and behold Thou lovest nothing. And what, oh, what is this that I say concerning Thee, my God, my life, my holy and sweet desire ? or what, when he speaks of Thee, can be said by any man ? and yet woe to him that speaks not, since even the dumb praise Thee.'¹

The book over which Vernon was bending was the 'Confessions of Augustine.' As he read he felt his eyes moisten, and at last he

¹ *St. Augustine's Confessions*, book i. chap. iv.

started at a tear that dropped on the page before him.

‘What’s Hecuba to me, or I to Hecuba?’ he exclaimed. ‘Do I really mean that? or is it only another form of self-indulgence? My God, what am I? Is there anything in me not contemptible?’

He hid his face in his hands, and remained for some time motionless. When he moved himself, he did so with resolution. He opened a drawer in his writing-table, he took out some paper, and after a certain further hesitation he abruptly put pen to it.

What he wrote was as follows :—

‘Why should a man wince at the sight of his inmost thoughts? Is he not a coward, if he does not dare confront them? Ah me! I am a coward; I wince and I hold back; false shame overcomes me. But my heart is troubled; my spirit is bruised and beaten, and courage at last has come to me from my

wretchedness. I may pretend I am happy ; but, O my God, I am not happy ! It is true that my friends or the delicious sunshine make my blood beat with pleasure, and many other such trifles excite me. I become excited childishly ; and I forget myself into a bright false happiness. But all the while there is a worm gnawing at my heart, and whenever I am quiet I feel it. I have tried to deceive myself ; I have tried to say this is not so. But I can deceive myself no longer ; and now I will face the truth. I will see what I am ; I will examine this mangled self of mine. Yes—I will put my thoughts into shameless black and white ; they shall have a solid body that I cannot pretend eludes me. Quick !—though I am shuddering, let me get the icy shock over ; let me plunge into confession. What should make me hesitate ? No one will see these pages, with this blurred image of my soul cast on them.

Whenever I wish it the fire can keep my secret.

‘What shall I say? Shall I speak as in reality my soul pines to speak? I will.

‘O my God, holiest and mightiest, most pitiful and yet most just, what I pine for is to speak to Thee. Let me write Thy name—let me brand it in writing, not think it only in faint and fleeting thoughts. Let me rouse my ears with the sound of my own voice crying to Thee. O God, what I long for is to lay bare my soul—to open it, to disrobe it, to expose it naked before Thee; and to cry to Thee to have pity, to have pity, and to look upon me!

‘And yet, how dare I, impure and faithless, loving nothing—so they tell me—and nobody? For Thou art pure and holy; and my very friend has told me that I am viler than most men. Am I so? Oh, teach me to know myself; humble my

pride; enlighten me! My God, I am not mocking Thee. What I ask of Thee is what my heart is crying for. Teach me to know myself.

‘And yet if indeed Thou hearest me, I must seem like one mocking; for Thou knowest how faith has failed me, and how bewildered and dark my mind is. Even whilst I am crying to Thee, whilst I am trying to open to Thee all my secret being, I know not, I am not sure, if you have any existence—you, the God I am crying to. Perhaps you are only a dream—an idea—a passing phenomenon in man’s mental history. And yet surely, if Thou existest, Thou wilt not, even for this cause, turn away from me, quenching the smoking flax. May it not be that Thou art revealing Thyself to me, through my wretched sense of Thy absence?’

‘But from me why art Thou absent? Is

it through my sins, through my own loveless nature? Have I nothing in my soul fit to offer Thee? And for this cause hast Thou put me far away from Thee?

‘I may be evil now; I may be in outer darkness; but I know that I was not always. I was once near Thee; I was once ever with Thee. That was when I was a little child. O my God, I will confess to Thee through my childhood.

‘I was no saint, Thou knowest; I was a little, worldly child, yet I will maintain even to Thy face that as a child I loved Thee, and with a child’s frankness I was always in secret turning to Thee. I thought of Thee in my play; I thought of Thee in riding my pony. Hardly an hour passed in which, without kneeling, I did not say some word to Thee. Nor did this end with my childhood; for as I grew older, and as my thoughts multiplied, more and more in secret did they fasten upon

Thee. And I grew very greatly to fear Thee, and yet I was not afraid to love Thee ; for my own sins were small, and I washed them out with nightly penitence. Often hast Thou heard my childlike lips confessing them.

‘ But as I thought upon Thy perfections, and as I looked round upon the world, a new sense grew in me. It was a sense of the world’s sin, and of how Thou wast being grieved and blasphemed everywhere. Of men’s sorrow, and want, and poverty, I had not heard much. What touched me was the misery of the sin that they lay wallowing in. The thought of this was never quite absent from me. It haunted me day and night through all my later boyhood. It very often subdued me in my gayest moments. Thou knowest how for this reason a great city was hateful to me. In the same way, although I could see my schoolfellows unhappy, and

be little moved by it, yet many a time when I have seen some young soul corrupting itself, I have said, "I would die, if he might be saved from sinning." O God, Thou hast heard me, if Thou hearest anything. Thou knowest, too, how my pillow has been damp with tears from my thinking on these things.

' Thus the time drew on when there was a new thing to happen to me. I was to draw near to Thee at Thy Son's altar. For this cause, I turned my thoughts upon myself more earnestly; and I cleansed my heart as I had never done before. And I received Thy Son's self into me with fear and trembling; and I was drawn closer, O Thou Holy One, to Him and Thee. And at the same time also my early life was expanding. My passions and the world's excitements began to stir me, and shot new colours into existence; and I hoped for love and for com-

panionship, and I longed for beauty. The sadness and the rapture overcame me that together stir men to singing. But Thou, O my God, wert present in all this. If I longed for the love of a woman, it was that both our faces might turn to Thee. And I saw Thee, too, in the blue sky and in the sunset, and in the reedy river with the moon in it, and in the sea, and the sea-shore. And each year I was tempted with more and more temptations, but I still kept watch over myself, and always in my trouble I cried to Thee. I spoke to no friend about these things. I communed with Thee only, and I tried very hard to carry the cross of Christ. When I have been dining with gay companions I have seen His face before me, beyond the lights and glasses. I have seen Him worn and sorrowful, pleading with and reproaching me. He has often said to me in the midst of my laughter, "I have suffered so much for thy

sake, canst thou not suffer even a little for Mine?"

' I lived like this for some four or, it might be, five years, and then the time began when Thou wert slowly to be withdrawn from me. Why was this, my God? Was it for my sins? And if so, for what sins? When, when did they begin? For Thou wast not withdrawn from me through my forgetting Thee, but through my ever thinking of Thee. I studied much and many things; and whatever I studied, I applied it to Thy Church and Thee. And new lights broke on me, and new roads of knowledge; and my soul suffered violence, and the sight of its eyes was changed. For by-and-by, though the change came very slowly, all that I had once been taught about Thee, the Sacraments also, through which I once thought I approached Thee, became to me like outworn symbols. I struggled to stay the change. I called to

Thee, Thou knowest how often, to keep it from me. Thou knowest how, as I felt my prayers grow faint, and their words lose their meaning, I still said to Thee every night and morning, "I believe; help Thou mine unbelief." Thou knowest, too, when 'Thou gavest me no answer, how I tried to find help thus, "He that doeth," I said, "shall know of the doctrine;" and I tried with fresh diligence to do my daily duties, hoping that in this way might my faith revive again. But it never did revive. On the contrary, all this while I was receding farther from Thee; and the more earnestly I sought Thee, the less near did I seem to come to Thee, till at last I was like a blinded bird, I knew not whither even to try to fly; and this body of mine, this Temple of Thy Holy Spirit, has been left empty; and vain thoughts and desires had been holding and still hold festival in it.

‘O my God, if Thou art, why for me art Thou not? Why art Thou thus withdrawn from me? Is it because I have sinned? Can that be the reason? Surely this Thou knowest, that it was not what men call sin that made my eyes dim to see Thee. It was not the lust of the flesh, nor the pride of life, although both of these assailed me. And if since then evil things have had hold on me, I have sinned because I first lost Thee; I have not lost Thee through sinning. There is no man or woman that for Thy sake I could not renounce easily, reserving no more care for them than to work for their souls indifferently. No—what I have lost Thee by is not sin; it is rather the very things whereby I resisted sin; it is my reason, my intellect, and my longing for what is true. I have lost Thee, my God, through my earnest search to find Thee.

‘And yet, for all this, do I dare to say I

am sinless? It may be that I am far worse than I think I am; for has not my very friend told me that I am viler than most men? Does he speak truth? Perhaps. For in many ways—it may be in all ways—he is a better man than I am. The ties and the affections of this life—those joys and sorrows with which Thou hast surrounded us—touch him, and take hold of him, and leave deep marks in him; but me they touch only as the shadows in a dream-night. Perhaps, then, here is the secret. Perhaps I am vile, not knowing it, because to renounce all for Thy sake would be so very small a pang to me, and a sacrifice to Thee is worthless of that which costs us nothing. What then? Must one love Thy creatures before one can love Thee? Must one not rather love Thy creatures because of Thee?

‘Thy creatures! Were they Thine I could indeed love them. I should know that

there was in them some eternal worth and value. But, without Thee, what are they more than shadows are? What are they more than I, who am the most frail and vain of shadows? They get no hold on me, nor I any on them. For a little while one pleases me, and then a little while and it does not please. It comes near me; presently it recedes again, and another is pushed into the place of it; and in me there is left no regret, nor any pain in my heart. And how shall this be otherwise? And what shall give these ghosts substance? Why, without Thee, what but a mere ghost is the universe, even to its farthest stars? Of the only cosmos man can ever know or conceive of, he is himself the co-creator; and with the ending of his consciousness the All ends also. It falls like a house of cards when one card is taken away from it. Such is it without Thee. And yet it is told me that if I loved my fellow-

ghosts, above all if I would take to my heart some one of them, they would then be ghosts no longer; and that, they being thus made real to me, I should again discern Thee.

‘ This may be true. There may be some philosophy in it. By Love as well as by the Word, the Heavens are perhaps made. But, O my God, wouldst Thou only reveal Thyself first to me, wouldst Thou only show me that Thou indeed existest, I would love all things then for Thy sake!

‘ And yet should I? I am not certain of that even. For, my God, if Thou existest Thou lovest all Thy creatures, and they are all infinitely precious. How, then, am I to inflame or influence my heart, that I should permanently love some one of these more than I love the others? I am perplexed, I cannot tell. Yet I know—even my common sense tells me—that it is only in this way that loving men do love.

‘ Nay, this, too, Thou knowest of me, that I have, as a fact, striven to love in this way. I sought to marry, and to be faithful all my life to another; and I trusted that with another’s eyes I might again discern Thee. But even this hope failed me. For what return did she whom I chose make to me? She gave me no help that I needed; but proffered me comfortless comfort, and help that I had no need of. Instead of showing me *Thee*, she turned away and prepared to worship *me*. She would have made me into *her* God, instead of guiding me to *mine*. And for a time this consoled me a little; but I soon grew weary of it, and more restless than ever. For how should this blind passion satisfy me? I did but blind her to Thee. She did not show Thee to me.

‘ It seems, then, that I have tried everything. And now, my God, what remains for me? How shall I plant my foot firm in this

land of shadows? I am not in pain. Ah, if I were in pain there would be more hope for me! I would not complain to Thee that I did not feed upon roses, if Thou wouldst vouchsafe only that the thorns might wound and tear me. And yet, O God, Thou knowest I am distracted still by trifles, by pleasures that are no pleasures, and by pains that are no pains. And Thou hast given me high spirits, and Thou hast hidden my soul in a raiment of light laughter, and in what, even to me, sometimes seems contentment. But my brain is empty; I know not where to turn. To this thing and to this thing I would apply myself; but whenever I begin to stir myself, the reason which Thou hast given me plucks me by the ear, and hisses in a whisper, "To what purpose? Are not all things vanity?"

‘And what is this I say? To whom am I speaking? I am speaking to One of whose

very existence I am doubtful. I am not certain if I would stake a hundred pounds upon it. Oh, my forlorn hopes! My reason trips me, I am entangled and thrown down. Fool that I am—wretched, wretched fool! And yet, though I am thus lying prostrate, thrown abject and confused upon the ground, I will not be hindered. O God, I still will speak to Thee. I will call Thee to witness that at least I *have* been near Thee, that I *have* known Thy presence, and that, far away though I be from Thee now, though this world of shadows may now blind my eyes to Thee, there nothing is in it anywhere that I have longed for as I have longed for Thee, there is nothing I have desired in comparison of Thee. Thou hast been to me my all, my life, my light, and my salvation. Thou hast been the one wealth of my soul—its one and only fire; and all that has hidden Thee has been but as burning ashes.

‘ Am I mad? Am I a hypocrite? Am I dreaming? Am I lying to myself, as I write thus? Am I playing a part before myself to deceive myself? O my God, after all, is it nothing but my own sin, my own lovelessness, that stands between me and Thee? Dost Thou put me away, seeing how lightly I have esteemed Thy creatures? Have I, as Campbell said to me, quenched Thy Spirit?’

‘ How odd Campbell’s name looked, stuck in like that!

‘ My God—is it not possible that I may plead my cause thus with Thee? May I not justify myself to Thee, and say, the worse I am now, the more does this show how I loved Thee? Thou wast present in every affection, in every energy of my life; therefore with Thy withdrawal every energy, every affection is ruined. Yes—I might say this, but for one thing. Ah me, my God, behold what is now

happening to me! The desire of Thee has long made me miserable; and, ah, more miserable that I am! even my desire for Thee is now deserting me. My heart is ceasing to ache for Thee. A hateful peace is slowly soothing it to its death. My soul is getting colder and colder; warmth is leaving it, as it leaves a man who is dying. O my God, remain with me! Keep my pain and my desolation alive in me! If Thou wilt not fill the void in my heart that Thou didst once fill, let the void remain void, let nothing else fill it. Give me no peace, unless it be Thy peace. Torment me, but forsake me not. Scourge me, keep me wretched and restless till I find Thee! This is indeed a sincere prayer. O my God, is it a wrong one?’

Here he came to a long pause, and threw his pen down, as if he would write no more. He looked round the room wearily, and

stared in a kind of stupor at the various books about him. At last his eye fixed on a volume of Herbert Spencer ; and for many minutes he was motionless. Then, seizing the pen again, he rapidly added what follows.

‘ Our own inward condition—our own sins and longings, and the bitter strife between them—to the teachers of the present day what trifles do such things seem !—or at best, what a storm in a saucer ! To the prophets of humanity, an unskilful bricklayer is a more tragic object than a ruined soul !’

Several times during the long course of his writing, Vernon had gone to the window, and peered out. He now went again once more, and the moon was setting—the moon, which during his after-dinner walk had been so high in the middle heavens. This showed him that the night must be far spent. Presently his eye fell on a small side-table, and there lay an object so common-place that it

seemed to him like a spectre. It was a letter he had not before noticed that had come for him by the evening's post. The writing, which was large and decided, might have been either a man's or woman's; and he fancied it was familiar, though he could connect no name with it. He broke open the envelope, as if the sight of it half dazed him; and the first words he read sent all the blood to his cheek.

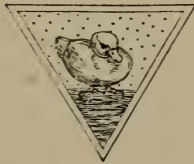
'Dear Mr. Vernon,'—began the letter, 'When I saw you the other day, I quite forgot to tell you that my very heart was broken. ('What!' thought Vernon, 'can this be from Miss Walters?') He went on reading.) 'And only a clever young man like you can be of the least comfort to me. My poor little darling sky-terrier Prinny—the thing on this earth I have loved best and longest—was run over and killed the other day by a young man with a tandem. Only conceive

it—a tandem! And this young gentleman could have hardly held in a donkey. Had he been one of my own stable-helps, I should have known pretty well what to do with him. And now you—if you will, I want you to write an epitaph for me. My angel is being embalmed by a very accomplished bird-stuffer, and is to have Christian burial when I get back to England. Your verses shall have a most honourable place; so be a good man, do, and write them for me.’ And then followed the bold signature of the Duchess.

With a tired, sleepy smile Vernon again sat down at his writing-table. A thought had struck him suddenly; and seizing the pen, he scribbled these hasty lines:—

Thou art gone to sleep, and we—
May we some day sleep like thee!
Prinny, were this heart of mine
Half so true, my dog, as thine,
I my weary watch should keep
For a something more than sleep!

Whatever besides sleep the exhausted writer may have longed for, sleep, at least, now unexpectedly fell upon him. His eye-lids grew heavy like lead, the pen dropped from his hand, and, sinking back in his chair, he became lost to consciousness.



BOOK III.



CHAPTER I.

WHEN Vernon awoke it was already daylight: the Venetian shutters were barred with the red gleams of morning. His eyelids ached, and he looked about him bewildered.

‘What has happened to me?’ he said to himself. ‘Am I awake, or is this a nightmare?’

He paced about the library, at first almost staggering; but by-and-by he recovered himself. He mounted to his bedroom. It had a ghastly, alien aspect. There was his bed, cold, smooth, and unslept in, with his night-

shirt folded lying upon it. He ruffled the sheets and pillow, that he might seem to his servant to have passed the night as usual; for, as to lying down, it was the last thing he now thought of. Then he tore his clothes off and plunged into a cold bath. He re-dressed himself; he made a large cup of coffee over a spirit-lamp; and having drunk it, he softly stole out of doors.

The long shadows of the clear day in its infancy made his garden wear an unfamiliar face for him. But the living breath of the air, fresh with the dew, and quick with the smells of flower-beds, woke in him new pulses. He paused and looked about him that his spirit might 'drink the spectacle.'¹ The sea was a pale sheet, sharply dark at the horizon, where it washed with its long levels the reddening tract of sunrise; and it was strewn

¹ His spirit drank
The Spectacle.—WORDSWORTH.

with floating fragments of the crocus and the rose of the sky. The faint promontories of Italy slept in a veil of vapour. Inland lay the far hill-villages, white scattered specks on the huge slopes of the mountains ; and below them were sombre ranges of far-reaching mounded olive-woods. These were unchanging in their soft, impassive darkness ; but except on these the light was brightening everywhere : and presently, far beyond them, all the gigantic highlands flushed in an instant from grey to a shining rose-colour, as they caught the risen splendour on their bleak frosts or dews.

Vernon, as he looked, felt himself come to life again, but to a life of clear sensation rather than clear thought. Thoughts, however, of some kind must have begun to dimly stir in him ; for he soon found himself moving in a definite direction. It was the direction of the Château St. John. He passed through

a wicket, into a large open expanse studded with heath and furze-bushes. The sea was on one side of it ; it was traversed by several paths ; and, for the sake of the air and view, he had often before wandered in it. Here he paused. Beyond were the tufts and plumes of the luxuriant Château shrubberies, and between these, by glimpses, the Château itself was visible. Vernon's eye fixed on the line of windows. The blinds were down ; the whole house seemed slumbering. The path where he stood led to a marble gateway, through which one entered the gardens and passed into an avenue of orange-trees. Towards this gateway, though he could not explain why, he was, in another moment, moving. Last night he could write his thoughts ; now they were too vague for analysis.

He passed through the gates with a feeling of hope and peril ; he might have been entering the charmed bounds of a sorceress.

And yet the place was already known by heart to him ; and only a week ago he had roamed at his own will in it. A maze of paths branched from the orange-avenue. He instinctively chose one that led far away from the house, and that brought him by-and-by to a long succession of gardens, terraced on the hill-side, and leading down to the sea. He stole on rapidly, past urns and statues, fountains and set flower-beds ; he descended by broad flights of steps from one level to another ; and he at last diverged into a steep winding path, which dived into a natural tunnel amongst certain fantastic rocks. This brought him presently, after several turnings, to the strand of a tiny bay. On either side was a curve of sheltering cliffs, not lofty but precipitous, and plunging straight into clear grey-green sea-water. The strand was a little platform, gravelled carefully, and backed by a bed of violets.

Here he paused, and at last began to meditate. Slowly his vague feelings turned into thoughts and images. His vigils of the night came back to him, with the strange projection on paper he had made of his own condition : and they took a ghastly aspect as the air of the morning breathed on them. Mixed, too, with these phantasmal memories were thoughts of a different order, which soon began to reveal themselves with semi-transparent bodies. They were thoughts of the clear-cheeked mistress of the grounds where he was now trespassing. No sooner had he become conscious of this, than a memory came back to him of certain sayings of Campbell's ; and he exclaimed to himself, with weary self-reproach, ' Do I think again of yielding ? What is it that has brought me here ? I do not love this girl. I have no wish to bind myself. All the fine and all the high feelings she stirs in me—they are not

serious : I attach no worthy meaning to them. I am merely trifling with them in the very way Campbell warned me of. Let me be brave for once—let me make one sacrifice ; let me call my imagination away from her. And yet—ah me—those lovely, lovely lips of hers !’

At this moment a slight noise startled him. He turned quickly round, and there, at the distance of a pace or two, she was herself standing before him. In an instant, like bats from daylight, his scruples took wing, and hid themselves. He was conscious of a shock, as of all his will yielding. For a little while he stood silent and looked at her, feeling nothing but his own blood beating, and letting his eyes rest on her. Seen thus in the dawning she was a fresh surprise to him. His memory, it is true, had retained her image clearly ; but it had let the image tarnish, and lose its exquisite delicacy. He saw she was

far more lovely than in his thoughts just now she had seemed to him. She was dressed in a way that, it was evident, was meant only for solitude. She had a long cloak on, with a border of broad sable. It was fastened round her throat, with additional closeness, by a small brooch of diamonds; and below it descended a pale-blue satin dressing-gown. She had apparently taken what at waking she could first seize upon; for on her slim shoes there was a glimmer of gold embroidery, and on one of her hands was a long evening glove. The other was bare, and held a pale, dewy rose in it.

Vernon's rapid glance took in all these details; and the same impression was renewed in him that he received at first meeting her. Everything about her was dainty, almost *fine* in its daintiness; yet, in relation to her, it seemed natural as her own complexion. And she herself, with the early

light caressing her—had that complexion stolen a tint from morning? Had the dews of night washed her violet eyes clearer?

Miss Walters was the first to speak; but she only exclaimed, 'Mr. Vernon!' and he for the first moment could only exclaim, 'Miss Walters!' He was not, however, a man to remain long tongue-tied; and very soon, with a smile, he was begging pardon as a trespasser. 'Before you came here,' he said, 'these gardens were a favourite haunt of mine; and I thought that, under cover of the morning, I might venture in, just once more, undetected.'

'And I thought,' said Miss Walters, with a glance at her own costume, 'that I might be undetected also. I certainly did not come out expecting to confront company.'

The soft, low voice in which these words were murmured, showed Vernon that she was not displeased at meeting him. Directly

afterwards she happened to drop her glove. She fixed her eyes on him smiling, and said, 'Pick that up, will you?' It was a simple request to make, but it had in it that subtle note of command, the assumption of which by a woman is one of the first signs of an understanding. Vernon realised this perfectly, and his heart swelled with rapture. He was fully launched now on the tide of luxurious feeling; and he murmured secretly, as his eyes met his companion's, 'My own! my own!' The consciousness of having even in thought applied such a phrase as this to a woman, might be to many men a sharp self-revelation; but Vernon knew himself far too well for that. No lover, however, of the most earnest and genuine kind could have put more tender expression than he did into his voice, when he asked her presently, 'Are you always so early a riser as this?'

'No,' she said; 'but I slept badly last

night ; and the morning looked so beautiful. I huddled on these things, as you see—anything I could get together ; I stole out noiselessly, and found myself in a fairy-land of roses, silent and fresh with dew. I hardly know these gardens yet. They are all a wonder and delight to me. I had never explored that little tunnel before ; and you may judge how surprised I was when I found you standing here.’

‘Let me show you,’ said Vernon, ‘the mysteries of your own domains. Let us go up again, and I will be your *valet de place*.’

She turned, and she went with him. His whole being was possessed with the sense of her near companionship. They wandered on together through the more sequestered walks, slowly and often pausing, for the sake of some sight or sound. Now it was a bird’s song that arrested them, now a prospect—a fan-palm, an arch of roses, or the peaks of

the distant Alps : and such things as these were for some time all they talked about. Impersonal, however, as the conversation seemed to be, a sense of mutual ease between them was growing under its kindly shelter ; nor was this to be wondered at. Conversations which are impersonal in form, are sometimes intensely personal in spirit. The subjects spoken about are like the masques worn at a ball ; and a passion can be declared plainly under the guise of praising a view. Things on the present occasion had not come to this : but the conversation was full, on both sides, of oblique hints of feeling ; and the subtle response of Miss Walters to every sight of beauty revealed to Vernon new depths in her character. She saw a thousand minute things that his eyes had passed over, even to the play of the dewdrops falling from leaf to leaf ; and when he pointed out to her the wider and bolder prospects, the feelings they stirred

in her seemed to be more deep than his own. She looked, he thought, amongst the dews and the roses, like the spirit of the morning facing its own creations.

Presently he was preparing to turn up a certain path, when with a quick movement she put her hand on his arm, and stopped him. 'Not that path,' she said. 'It brings us in full view of the house; and to the observation of the servants, I think, we should be a somewhat mysterious couple.'

When a woman once shows herself conscious that she is doing anything clandestine, a man can rarely avoid some slight change in his manner towards her; and Vernon now, as they diverged into a different path, felt that he turned to her with a slightly less disguised admiration. Any such freedom, however, spent itself like a relapsing wave, as his look encountered hers. Hers showed no fear

of, or no offence at, him. It was full only of a sad, earnest inquiry, as though she were wondering what were his feelings. As she thus regarded him, she betrayed something he had not before noticed. In spite of its radiant aspect her face bore signs of weariness, and under her eyes were streaks of transparent purple.

‘Yes,’ she said absently, as Vernon remarked on this; ‘last night I was very wakeful. And you,’ she added—‘I think the same fate must have been yours. Why, Mr. Vernon, how is it that this has escaped me? You are more than tired; haggard is the only word for it. Has anything painful happened to you?’

Vernon was silent for a few moments; then he answered smiling, ‘You make me speak to you; your voice acts like a spell on me. I spent last night face to face with a spectre. I spent it face to face with that

dead self of mine which I told you I had come here to find again.'

'Yes,' she said; 'you told me. To some people your words might perhaps have had no meaning. But I understood them. I have seen and known things that made them quite plain to me. Tell me, then—have you so soon found what you were seeking for?'

'Not it—no; but the phantom of it. It was the piteous phantom, not the returning friend. At least I think so; for just now I can be sure of nothing. Some day, perhaps, I may be able to tell you better.'

'I, too,' she said, 'have something that I may perhaps tell *you*—some day.'

Vernon was silent for a moment; and then he said to her, 'Give me that rose as a pledge that you will keep your promise.'

'It is not a *promise*,' she murmured; 'it is a *perhaps* only.' But at the same time with

a slow, regretful movement she gave him the pledge he asked for. As he took the flower from her, their hands touched; for a few seconds they lingered in light contact, and then gently, and with no resistance on her part, Vernon took hers in his own. As he held it, he looked into her face silently; by a slight movement he made her turn round to the sunrise, and raising the rose in his hand, he laid it against her cheek. 'And you are pale,' he said, 'like one of these creamy rose-petals. See what you have given me—it is your own image.'

Miss Walters made no answer, excepting with her eyes and with her cheeks, whose living rose-leaf flushed with a faint carnation. A pause here might have been not without embarrassment. Vernon felt this with the instinct of the true love-maker, and he lit on a new subject instantly. He saw that in her left hand she was holding a small volume,

and with a voice quite altered, he asked, 'What have you got there?'

'You would hardly guess perhaps,' she said, with a little, flickering smile. 'It is a Bible. I always keep it by the side of my bed, and I always read a verse or two in the morning when I get up. I make my selections in a way no critic would approve of; and I'm sure I can't explain to you what my exact principle is. This morning I chose—shall I tell you what? Let us sit down upon this bench for a moment, and I will read it out to you. No—' she said, putting her hand on his, 'you must not take the book from me. I don't want you to see the context. "Awake, O north wind; and come, thou south; blow upon my garden, that the spices thereof may flow out. . . . I sleep, but my heart waketh: it is the voice of my beloved that knocketh, saying, Open to me, my sister, my love, my dove, my undefiled:

for my head is filled with dew, and my locks with the drops of the night." ' "

The selection of this passage was a slight shock to Vernon, or rather the fact that, having selected it, she should have thus read it to him. But so absent from her seemed all consciousness that it could have any personal application, that he instantly felt ashamed of so vulgar a suspicion of her.

' They are beautiful verses,' he said, ' and you read them beautifully. I am going to ask you an odd question, seeing that this is only our second meeting. Do you say prayers in the morning, as well as read the Bible ? ' '

' I am a person,' she said abstractedly, ' who has said many prayers—many, many, many. I have passed nights of watching, just as last night you did. But women endure and suffer with more patience than men do.'

‘With more patience, yes; because they have less to suffer.’

‘Do you think that is true?’ she said, smiling sadly.

‘Not of all women—no; but of women like you it must be. The sufferings we talk of are those of the heart and spirit. I don’t know your history; your burdens may have been more heavy than mine; but they have been burdens of a nobler kind; they have been such as are laid only on those who are fit to bear them. It is far easier for the saint to carry the cross, than for the sinner to find or raise it again when he has once dropped it in the snow.’

Again she looked at him with the same sad smile. ‘Do you think,’ she said, ‘that I am a saint, then?’

‘No,’ he answered; ‘you are not a saint. But I think you are listening for the sounds that the saints hear.’

Presently he resumed. 'I might perhaps have thought you were a saint already, if it were not for one reason.'

'And what reason is that?'

'Do I venture to tell you, I wonder? It is entirely a subjective reason. Well—it is this. If I knew that you would never know it, or that, knowing, you would forgive or forget it, I feel quite sure that I should touch your lips with mine.'

As Vernon said this, he again put out his hand to her, but, instead of meeting it, she raised hers to her face, and for a moment hid her eyes with it.

'Remember,' she said presently, 'nothing like that must ever come into our friendship. I have set you apart in my own mind from all other men, and you must learn to think of me not as others have done.' She seemed to be half pleading with and half warning him; and her words came with a singular soft

solemnity which at once fanned his feelings and made him resolved to check them. 'You must think of me,' she went on, 'just as I am to think of you. I am your friend, or, if you like it, your sister : and near relations, you know, are only absurd when they are sentimental.'

Vernon could not understand her. She was evidently all in earnest ; but there was something in herself, some subtle power in her presence, by which her words were more than neutralised. 'Surely,' he thought, 'this is not the voice of a sister ; and when feelings are merely sisterly, it is never worth while saying so.' He was stung by a hybrid impulse—the wish to obey her words and the wish to yield to her fascination.

'I will think of you,' he exclaimed, 'in any way you tell me to : and you shall let me call you by the name you have yourself taught me—my sister, my love, my dove, my undefiled. May I call you that ?'

She made no answer, but she clasped her hands before her; he could see that she clasped them tightly: and she sat motionless with her eyes turned upwards. At last she said, 'Could you only call me that truly, I would give up everything!'

'What,' murmured Vernon, 'should hinder me? My love, my dove, my undefiled, I shall always connect you with the clear dews of the morning; and your friendship will revive my life like a second baptism.'

'You are reckoning without your host,' she answered, still looking straight before her. 'You know nothing about me yet, nor who it is you are speaking to.'

'What is wanting in my knowledge,' said Vernon, 'is made up by my instincts. Think, we have only met twice; and yet already you are my friend and my sister, and you have already—at least, I think so—put a new life

into me. I feel like a dusty flower that has had dew fallen on it.'

She rose from where they were sitting, and began to walk on slowly. He followed her in silence, watching her graceful movements. A long branch of roses dangled across the path. She drew it towards herself, and stood still, smelling one of the blossoms. Presently, not looking at Vernon, 'I think,' she said, 'you had perhaps better beware of me.'

'For my sake or for yours?'

'Not for mine, certainly. There is little need for me to beware of anything.'

'Nor for me either,' said Vernon. 'You will not ruin my peace. I should perhaps be a better man if you were able to. Friendship is all I ask for. I neither expect more nor wish for it. As long as you care to meet me, let my heart throb as I think of you. If you withdraw your caring, no matter

how capriciously—well, I will not reproach you.'

'I doubt,' she said smiling, 'if even I could take things quite so easily as all that. However, we shall see—we shall see. We shall have plenty of opportunities. And that reminds me'—here all of a sudden her manner became conventional—'I fear you called upon us yesterday and did not find us at home. It is my fault that you had your trouble for nothing. I had written you a note myself the day before, to say that we were called away, and to ask you in my aunt's name to dine last night with us. But—you see this is what it is to be a methodical woman!—I left it on my dressing-table, and it never was taken at all. You would have only met Colonel Stapleton.'

'What sort of man is Colonel Stapleton?' said Vernon abruptly. 'I barely know him to speak to.'

‘Oh,’ she said carelessly, ‘you can see what he is in a moment. He hunts and shoots, and has travelled over half the world. I am fond of him, for I’ve known him ever since I was *so* high; but there’s nothing whatever in him; and I don’t know that you missed much in not dining with us.’

‘The night before,’ said Vernon, ‘I had a little dinner of my own. My guests were an old college friend, who, I am sorry to say, is gone; and a poor Catholic priest, who is staying near here for his health—an excellent man, but a little depressing sometimes.’

‘A priest!’ said Miss Walters.

‘Not one of these country priests. My friend is an Englishman, whom I once knew well—a fellow called Frederic Stanley.—You seem surprised. Do you know him? He is stopping here at the *Pension*.’

‘Know him!’ she replied. ‘He is a sort

of cousin of mine, and is the truest friend I ever had in the world. Mr. Vernon,' she went on, 'whatever relationship yours and mine may be, Frederic Stanley was *really* like a brother to me. I could once have told him anything ; I could have asked his advice in anything. But I shall never do that again. There is one thing gone from my life—gone like many other things.'

'Why,' said Vernon, 'should his being a priest estrange you ?'

'It doesn't,' she said. 'I was not thinking of that. That, in itself, would rather help to unite us. It is nothing that he knows of that divides us now. Perhaps you—but let me look once in your eyes again ; just look at me, please, for one moment steadily—perhaps you will know what it is some day. But about Fred Stanley,' she went on. 'I should like you very much to be friends with him ; I feel so sure he could help you. I have an instinct,

in your case ; I have a power of divination which tells me so.'

'We are old friends already,' said Vernon ; 'we were at the same college together.'

'You are not yet friends in the way I wish you should be, or I am sure you would not have spoken of him as you did just this moment. You call him depressing, and I think I know what you mean by that. You remember him as he once was, full of feeling for art and poetry, and full of interest in everything from science to society ; and you misjudge the change in him.'

'In some men,' said Vernon, 'religion kindles poetry ; it seems to have quenched his. There is something now about him that is hard and prosaic.'

'If this is so, I can tell you the meaning of it. His right hand has offended him, and he has cut it off deliberately. There is no one who naturally is more alive to beauty, or

to whatever can flatter delicately ambition, intellectual pride, or the senses ; and under the priest's surface, if you can only once get under it, you will still discover the man of the world and the poet ; only you will discover them crucified. He has given his best as a sacrifice to the God who, he thinks, loved men ; his best, remember, not that which has cost him nothing. You will detect his love for poetry in his very silence about it. Try—to please me, try—to make better friends with him.'

'I will try,' said Vernon, 'both for your sake and for his. But tell me this, will you—what you have just said makes me ask you—are you yourself a Catholic?'

'No,' she said with decision ; 'that is a thing I never could be. I admire goodness, and I hate evil—you might realise how intensely, if you only knew my history ; and amongst my Catholic friends have been the best people I have known. But how, with

their eyes open, they can swallow so much nonsense—I suppose there is some explanation, but I confess it is quite beyond me.’

‘What sort of nonsense?’

‘Frederic Stanley, for instance, thinks he could absolve me from my sins. I confess to him, and then he wipes the sin out. That is his notion. Now he might advise me, were I able to take advice, how to avoid repeating my sins; but it is ridiculous even to fancy that he could relieve me of those I have committed.’

‘It is quite as mysterious to me,’ said Vernon, ‘that God should forgive sins at all, as that He should forgive them through Stanley’s agency.’

‘It may be so,’ she sighed. ‘I don’t know what to think about it. A God who is not merciful is a monster; a God who is just and merciful seems an impossibility. Perhaps, after all, there is no mercy needed except

from one human being to another ; and as to what we do to ourselves, perhaps that matters nothing.'

Vernon looked at her in surprise. 'Do you really think that?' he said.

She cast her eyes down, and began to put on her glove. She seemed occupied with the beauty of her own delicate hands. Presently however, and not without hesitation, 'I'll tell you,' she said, 'what I really do think. Religion, when a good man is possessed by it, makes him unselfish, and eager to work for others ; but it makes a woman selfish. It centres her whole anxiety on keeping her own robe taintless ; and it is always sending her to her looking-glass that she may examine her moral toilette. In the language of religion, this is female virtue *par excellence*. Well, I can't help thinking—I hope you won't be shocked at me—that there are other virtues in God's eyes more important

than this ; and that it will be asked us first, what work have your hands done ? not, whether we have kept them quite clean in doing it.'

' I have myself,' said Vernon slowly, and not without some surprise, ' been inclined to accuse Catholicism of the same fault in its teaching. But the fault—and I am sure it exists—is really not in Catholicism, but in certain times and teachers ; perhaps, too, in certain pupils. What the Church teaches is, that we all of us, women as well as men, have two duties—one to ourselves, the other to humanity ; and that these are like the two feet on which the pilgrim goes to God. It is easy to sneer at the self-regarding virtues ; but the Church is a true philosopher when she insists to man on their necessity. Unless we work for others, we shall have nothing to offer God : unless we keep our hearts pure, we shall be unable to offer it.'

‘Are you, then,’ said Miss Walters, ‘a Catholic?’

‘I don’t know,’ he murmured, ‘what I am.’

‘Just now,’ she said, ‘you asked me a question, and I believe I evaded it. You asked me if I said my prayers. I am now going to ask the same question of you. Do you?’

‘Very ill; but still I do say them.’

‘Then if you do,’ she said, holding out her hand to him, ‘pray for me. Now, go. The clock is striking eight. I must get back to the house.’

Her hand was in his. He held it, and it was not withdrawn from him. Here again there was a sharp, distinct struggle in him. Should he do something, or should he forbear from doing it? Impulse urged him one way; conscience, with clear voice, the other: and in a few seconds again conscience yielded. Nearer and nearer to himself he drew his fair

companion. She, as if spell-bound, offered no resistance. Presently he was sensible of the warmth of her face close to him: a moment more, and he had done what he said he longed to do; he had kissed her on her sad, proud lips.

The touch recalled her to herself. 'Go,' she said, 'go! You don't know what it is you are doing to me.' And without another look she was gone.

Vernon found his way homewards in a new, confused excitement. A wild pleasure was struggling with self-reproach, and he hardly knew the exact nature of either. His mind was a mystery to himself, like a magician's crystal globe. There seemed to be in it a white vapour rising, which would take presently some un conjectured shape.



CHAPTER II.

THE after-taste of the above interview was to Vernon not without bitterness. He was beset by two reflections of an opposite nature, and each in its own way annoying. One of these was, 'I was a fool to kiss her.' The other, 'I was a still greater fool not to ask her when I might be allowed to see her again.' He had already made his formal call at the Château; he could not repeat it without some sort of invitation; and it might be a day, it might perhaps be even two, before his new romance could be proceeded with. Fate, however, proved more kind than he had anti-

culated; for in the course of the morning the following note arrived for him :

‘ Dear Mr. Vernon,’ it ran, ‘ there is a little town among the mountains here called St. Paul du Var, which my aunt has seen from a distance, and much wishes to visit. We have some thoughts of going there this afternoon ; and if you have nothing better to do, it would give her great pleasure if you would come with us.

‘ Sincerely yours,

‘ CYNTHIA WALTERS.’

Then came the following postscript :

‘ Remember, if you are to be ever a friend of mine, you must never act again as if you were more than a friend.’

He seized a pen eagerly, and had begun to write an acceptance, when he was cut short by a very unwelcome interruption. The mother had arrived of his little crippled *pro-*

tégée, and was begging to speak to him about her child's condition. 'Damn her!' was his first exclamation; and then to the servant he said, 'Let her come to-morrow.' The man closed the door, but in another moment Vernon had recalled him. 'No,' he said; 'you may tell her to come in now.' A breath of garlic announced the old woman's advent. Vernon forced a smile and held his handkerchief to his nostrils. The story was this: the boot required altering; one of the steel supports grazed the poor child's ankle, and, so far as Vernon could gather, she was in great suffering. 'Let her take the boot off, and I will come to-morrow.' It was on his lips to say this, and to say it with some impatience. But he happened to look into the old crone's face, and his purpose altered. 'I will be with you,' he said, 'in the course of the next hour, and will take the child to Nice with me, where the boot shall be refitted on

her.' Biting his lips with irritation, he wrote Miss Walters an unwilling refusal, and started presently on his distasteful work of mercy. 'I wish,' he murmured, 'the little animal was at the devil. Here's another day she's spoilt for me.' By-and-bye, however, he saw a brighter side to the question. 'After all,' he thought, 'it has perhaps turned out for the best. Had I been with that girl, I should have committed myself more and more. I should have said much and meant nothing. Or else—my God, what a brute I am!—I should have been using the very thoughts that I should like to hold most sacred as so many dominoes in an idle game of love-making. I have done that already this morning. Campbell was right about me!'

Reflections such as these kept recurring to him throughout the day; but they were not without their rivals. The memory of Miss Walters—her beauty, her delicate feeling, her

strange, ambiguous phrases, and the touch of her hand and lips—these would recur also, and make him again long for her company. His business with the child detained him some hours at Nice, and it was latish when he got home again. But the events of the day had done little to calm his mind. Prudence, desire, and conscience still stung and distracted him.

When he entered his library, he found another letter awaiting him, in an envelope not unlike the one he had received that morning. But he was disappointed; it was not from Miss Walters. It would have told its own authorship, even without the Duchess's signature. 'I hope,' it ran, 'that you have composed me those verses. However, it is not about these that I am writing; and I shall not dun you yet. What I want to tell you is that old Surbiton is coming over to the Cap to-morrow for me, to give a proper

blowing up to the head gardener at the Hotel there ; and, as we all know how particular he is about his eating, I want you, if you will, to let him come to you for luncheon. If I may give you a hint, I will tell you he worships truffles. There's another man here—a good sort of creature in his way. You would perhaps, if he comes, let him trespass on your hospitality also.'

The prospect of any excitement pleased Vernon at the moment. He wrote out a telegram to the Duchess, that was to be sent the first thing next morning. He summoned his *chef*, and had a long conference with him about a luncheon: then, thoroughly wearied, he took himself off to bed ; and Lord Surbiton, truffles, and Miss Walters in turn engaged his thoughts, as by dreamy stages they decomposed into unconsciousness.



CHAPTER III.

HE sent next day to the station to meet Lord Surbiton, who in due time arrived. He was not alone, however. The other man mentioned by the Duchess had escaped Vernon's mind for the moment; and it was with no great feeling of pleasure that he discovered it to be Colonel Stapleton. He had had a nodding acquaintance with the Colonel for many years previous; he had had a vague impression that he hunted, shot, and gambled; and he had had passing glimpses of him at various London houses. But as for thinking of

him for two minutes together, he had never done this till the dinner at Monte Carlo. Colonel Stapleton since that evening had been a vivid personality to Vernon, and a personality distasteful to him to a degree he could not account for. He was aware that in some vague way he might regard the man as a rival; but his distaste was different from the mere distaste of jealousy. He grudged him Miss Walters' acquaintance, not because there was much that could attract her in him, but because there was so little. 'Brute!' he had murmured several times to himself, 'how I hate those swimming eyes of his! I can't bear to think that her eyes should look at him.' This, however, he had himself seen they had done; and whenever he recollected how often and how smilingly, Miss Walters seemed withdrawn from him to some mysterious estranging distance. But that was not all. In the very process of this with-

drawal she became more alluring to him ; and he felt himself at such moments grow sick with a new longing for her.

The Colonel's reappearance made him again conscious of this ; and it required all his tact to prepare to receive him civilly. It was a moment's consolation to him, as he welcomed the two guests, to find that Lord Surbiton looked somewhat bored with his companion ; and Vernon at once, in his own mind, taxed the Duchess with the arrangement. Here at least he was right. Her Grace dearly loved arranging.

Matters, however, went better than he had hoped for. The Colonel's manner was one of extreme good breeding ; and his frank and evident shyness at intruding on a bare acquaintance, at once made Vernon genial without the trouble of trying to be so. Presently, too, at luncheon Lord Surbiton lit up into vivacity. All he had wanted hitherto

had been some subject he could discuss strikingly ; and he soon found, in the science of good living, one suited equally to himself and his small audience.

‘ I often think,’ said the Colonel, ‘ that the best meat I ever tasted was a piece of mutton in the desert, that was cooked for me by a young Coptic girl.’

Lord Surbiton turned to him with a keen glance in his eyes. ‘ The Coptic Church,’ he said, ‘ shows a singular lenity, does it not, in its rule over the human affections ? ’

‘ Certainly,’ said the Colonel, ‘ when I studied its constitution, you could be married and unmarried by it, just as the fancy seized you. You could be married when you went to Egypt, and unmarried when you left it. What one gained by the arrangement was a wider field of choice.’

‘ But suppose,’ said Lord Surbiton, ‘ one of these women became attached to you ;

might there not be some difficulty then in getting quit of a lawful union ?'

'I shouldn't think so,' said the Colonel, despatching a fine truffle. 'Besides, distance can divorce one, as well as the Coptic Church.'

Lord Surbiton sighed. 'I regret much,' he said, 'that I have hardly set foot in Egypt; and I have yet been a constant wanderer. Like Shelley's *Alastor*,

I have known
Athens and Tyre, and Baalbec, and the waste
Where stood Jerusalem.'

Colonel Stapleton stared. 'I, too, have been in the East,' he said quietly. 'I was at Jerusalem only a year ago.'

'Not,' said Vernon, 'as a religious pilgrim, I suppose ?'

The Colonel brushed a speck of dirt from his finely-shaped finger nail. 'No,' he said; 'but I went there with a remarkably unrepentant Magdalene. She had had something

to do with some one who had something to do with India ; and I came across her at a loose end in Cairo. It was a curious thing to see a woman of that kind amongst the sacred scenes one has heard about, and all that kind of thing. She, now—this woman—what should you think her great wish was ? Not to see Olivet, or Jericho, or any of those places. Upon my word I doubt if she had ever even heard of Abraham. What she wanted to see was a certain dance at Damascus.'

Lord Surbiton's eyes shot with a fire of intelligence, and his mouth emitted the ghost of a hollow cackle. 'I know the dance you mean,' he said. 'I've seen it myself several times.'

'I mean this,' said the Colonel ; and he gave a minute description.

'I must confess,' said Vernon, 'that I don't myself see the point of it.'

‘Why, my dear fellow,’ replied the Colonel in a slightly aggrieved tone, ‘it’s the most damned suggestive thing imaginable. Though, upon my word,’ he went on, ‘I don’t know if it beats some of the plays in Paris. Have you, Lord Surbiton, seen——?’ and he named a certain play and theatre. ‘You have? Well, in the second act, did you ever notice how the women’s dresses were cut?’

Lord Surbiton with regretful interest confessed that he had not. The Colonel at great length enlightened him. It was now Lord Surbiton’s turn to impart instruction, and he repaid the Colonel in kind; it may also be said with usury. His vivid power both of imagination and description made most of what he said quite unfit to be chronicled; and the Colonel’s eyes, as he listened, swam with attentive moisture.

By-and-by they all adjourned to the garden, where a table, under the myrtles, was

set with wine and coffee. This turned Lord Surbiton's thoughts into quite a new direction, and, greatly to Vernon's pleasure, he began quoting Horace. Colonel Stapleton since he left Eton had been no great student ; but the sound of the Latin tongue reminded him of one classical quotation. *Post prandia, Callirrhoe*. He had hardly aired this small fragment of learning, when his manner changed suddenly ; and, slightly embarrassed, and not without some feeling of delicacy, 'That line,' he said, 'was not very well chosen by me, since, after Mr. Vernon's *prandium*, I have to call upon his next-door neighbours.'

'Confound him !' thought Vernon. 'What the devil does he come over here at all for ?'

'But Colonel,' said Lord Surbiton, 'you are to help me as her Grace's emissary.'

'I will be back in half-an-hour, if our host will excuse me presently.'

An idea flashed upon Vernon. 'Will you bring your friends with you,' he said, 'and we will all see the Hotel garden together?'

'Certainly,' said the Colonel, with gay good humour. 'I forgot to ask you if you had seen much of them, since that evening when you carried them off in triumph. I watched you as you drove away, and a fine, spanking pace those horses of yours went, too?'

'Who are you talking of?' exclaimed Lord Surbiton. 'Is it that lovely Miss Walters? By all means bring her, if such a goddess will deign to appear among us.'

'Upon my word,' said the Colonel, 'she is a nymph or a goddess. Did you ever see any one with a turn of the neck like that? She's about the handsomest woman in Europe—Miss Walters is; at least, that's my opinion; and full of fun when you only get to know her as I do. Then, the

dear old aunt too—what a capital old lady that is! I've the greatest regard for Aunt Louisa.'

'You, I suppose,' said Vernon, 'have known them for a long time?'

'God bless my soul, yes! Why, when I first knew Miss Cynthia she used to sit on my knees and kiss me. But'—the Colonel suddenly started, and his voice dropped with alarm—'who's this coming here? It looks, for all the world, like the parson.'

Vernon turned and saw it was Frederic Stanley. 'Well,' said the Colonel hurriedly, 'I'm off to the Château, and in half-an-hour I'll be back again.'

As for Stanley, he began with a quiet apology: 'Your servant, Vernon, never told me you had visitors; but merely said that I should find you here in the garden.'

'Sit down, my dear fellow,' said Vernon; 'I'm perfectly charmed to see you.' But

he felt, at the same time, that the priest was out of his element ; and was a little nervous when he made him known to Lord Surbiton.

The event, however, set all his fears to rest. Lord Surbiton's versatility was more than a fancied gift in him ; and on Stanley's appearance his entire demeanour changed. His furrowed face invested itself with a look of thoughtful gravity ; and in his tone and gesture, as he acknowledged his new acquaintance, there was the most perfect mixture of fitting respect and dignity. Vernon thought, as he watched him, that he had never seen a truer gentleman. Stanley too, in becoming a priest, had by no means forgotten the *savoir faire* of the guardsman ; and now that the Colonel was gone, the trio were presently quite at ease together. The picturesqueness of the scene was such as to strike all of them. The blue of the sea that glowed through an

arch of myrtles, the glitter of the glasses, the red flash of the Burgundy, and the gold of the piled-up oranges, not to mention themselves in the green shadow—all this to three graceful scholars again suggested Horace, and the calm of the Horatian philosophy. Lord Surbiton broke out into several apt quotations, which both the others would in turn either cap or continue; and he exclaimed presently with all his pomp of utterance, ‘If every pleasure, as Epicurus said it did, springs somehow or other from some satisfaction of the senses, it is poetry, it is literature alone, that makes them last a lifetime.’

‘Epicurus,’ said Vernon, ‘would, I think, have admitted that. He was the wisest, in his generation, of all the old philosophers; and the popularity of Horace is one of the best proofs of this.’

‘True,’ said Lord Surbiton. ‘There is

something, to me, much finer in the Epicurean calm than in the Stoic fortitude. The man who is stern, is repressing his emotion; the man who is calm has killed it. Think how the two schools looked on death, for instance. The Stoic looked on it with a defiant frown; by the act of an iron will he resolved not to wince at it. He braved it—' and here in Lord Surbiton's eyes came a slight flash of the Devil—' as a clumsy but virtuous peasant might brave some wicked nobleman. But the Epicurean had no need of resolves, or for making heroic faces. He met death, as Metternich met Napoleon, with the reserved grace of a man who is the superior in all but power; and who yet gives power its due. Horace, as you say, Vernon, is a proof of this. His odes show us more clearly than anything the pathetic dignity, the politely-concealed contempt, the easy self-possession, and the superb high breeding,

with which the Epicurean poet greeted and treated death.'

'Whatever we think,' said Stanley, 'about the religious view of the matter, that sort of philosophy is now no longer possible.'

'Goethe's mother,' said Vernon, 'found it so; and so did our Charles the Second.'

'I was thinking,' said Stanley, 'not of death then, but of life. What I meant was that a life of the proudest calm, though enriched with all the pleasures that can stimulate mind or body, is an ideal that now no man of insight can be satisfied with. We hear much, it is true, about the sublime calm of Goethe. I have almost thought myself that that sublime was very near the ridiculous. But, even were it not so, we are in Goethe's age no longer. There is a new spirit now abroad in the world; we are becoming roused to the sense of a new duty. I am speaking of the modern conception of progress, and

the duty of each one of us to humanity. Your Epicurean with his calm, in the face of a thought like that, is like a man who sits on his luggage when his train is leaving the station.'

'Surely,' said Lord Surbiton, with a smile of surprised courtesy, 'the Catholic Church generally does not regard progress so complacently: and humanity as an object of worship I should have conceived in her eyes to be little better than Antichrist.'

'Do you remember the last words of an expelled Pope on his death-bed, and the answer his attendants made him—"Because I have loved righteousness and hated iniquity, therefore I die in exile"? "Because God has given thee the heathen for thine inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for thy possession, Vicar of Christ, in exile thou canst not die." Well, in the same way one may speak of the Church always. She

cannot be outside progress, because she herself is everywhere. What she rejects in the spirit of Modern Secularism, is not its truths, but its false and delirious expression of them. The religion of humanity, the religion of human progress—these are really implicit parts of her system; and it is she alone that can give them a reasoned meaning. Many people, we know, think them to be new revelations. Suppose we call them so. The life of the Church is a series of new revelations. She is human nature perpetually unfolding itself.'

'I should have conceived,' said Lord Surbiton, 'that the Catholic type of sanctity was a thing fixed for ever, and that it could make no terms with progress.'

'That is true,' said Stanley, 'in one sense, but it is not true in another: for change and fixity are not of necessity incompatible. The type of a perfect soldier may always remain the same; but it includes a change of conduct

according to changed conditions. His part may be sometimes action ; sometimes a mute vigilance : and it is the same with the saint, in the world's changing ages. Myself I fully recognise that we are now being swept onwards into an era of new duties, and that Almighty God may be demanding a larger service from us.'

'I, too,' said Lord Surbiton, 'can tell that a change is coming. You and Vernon will see it ; but it will find the eyes of me and my generation closed.' He was silent for a minute or two, whilst he lighted a large cigar. 'I am not a Catholic, Mr. Stanley,' he resumed, 'but I am a student of human history ; and, putting our obvious differences aside, my view of the Church has been yours. I am glad to find that I have so orthodox an authority for it. She has seemed to me to have embraced, and to have been the only cause that has done so, all that the most

many-sided genius ever could or can be busy with. She was at once a perfect saint, and a perfect woman of the world, and she could understand all man's lowest impulses, and yet still for ever lead him up to the highest. Me,' he went on sighing, 'she has taught at least one lesson--that there is little in this world worth a regret on losing it.'

'You are the last person, my lord,' said Stanley with politeness, 'one could expect to hear say that. You have fame, position, fortune—all that the world can give you.'

'It is these blessings,' said Lord Surbiton, 'that have made my heart so teachable. It may be wisdom to despise the world; but to despise it thoroughly you must first possess it.'

These words were uttered with a ghastly kind of impressiveness, and received the reward they courted—a moment's complete silence. This was ended presently by sounds

of a new quality. The music of female voices was suddenly heard approaching, and mixed with them came the Colonel's crackling laughter.

Vernon's heart had begun to beat quickly. He turned his head, and there was the group before him.

'You see,' said Lady Walters, 'we have come to return your visit; and we hope you will show us your villa, as well as her Grace's gardens.' But Vernon had little time for thinking of Lady Walters. Her niece was there, standing side by side with the Colonel. She had just, as she said presently, been driving her pair of ponies; and she still had on a tight-fitting cloth dress, beneath which protruded the tip of a varnished boot. The slightly masculine air which her present costume gave her, made a piquant mixture with her natural grace and softness. It seemed to hint to Vernon of some new side

to her character ; and it touched him, he knew not why, with a quick twinge of jealousy. The way she greeted him did not dispel this feeling. She was perfectly frank and friendly : she was, indeed, too frank. He sought in vain from either her eye or hand any sign of their strange, secret intimacy. ‘ Good heavens, he thought, ‘ and it was but yesterday that I kissed her ! ’

In an instant, however, he was distracted by another scene enacting itself. Stanley, hearing strangers approaching, had withdrawn to a little distance. He had not even heard that the Walters were at the Cap de Juan ; and he now first learned the fact by finding them there facing him. Vernon narrowly watched Miss Walters, as the meeting was taking place ; and he saw how truly she had spoken when she called Stanley a brother. ‘ I had been meaning,’ she said. ‘ to have sent you a note yesterday : but now to-night you

must come—won't you?—and dine with us.' Stanley assented, and directly afterwards withdrew himself.

The next step with the others was now to see Vernon's villa; and Vernon in showing it began to feel more prosperous. The Colonel, it is true, showed a wish to engross Miss Walters; but events at present would often stand in his way. She was anxious to be told about various books and pictures, and on these points she could only appeal to Vernon. Indeed for a good five minutes he was almost *tête-à-tête* with her, as they turned over together a portfolio of old engravings. During this time their eyes met once; and for a moment hers softened as if in recognition of their intimacy. Directly afterwards, however, came an odour of Ess bouquet, and, looking up, Vernon saw the Colonel behind them. 'Fine engravings,' said the latter, 'some of those, I should think.' And then

in an undertone, when Miss Walters' back was turned, 'And devilish free, too, a lot of those old plates are.' He said this with a smile, and a glance at the closed portfolio.

Vernon answered him with extreme coldness. 'There is nothing, you may be sure, that is free in that portfolio; or I should not have been showing it to Miss Walters.' But the Colonel was quite unwounded. He only glanced over his shoulder to see that they were unobserved, and pulled from his pocket a small morocco book with a lock to it. 'If you want,' he said, 'to see modern art, just look into that. I got it at Nice this morning.' Vernon looked, but it was for an instant only. The contents were a series of photographs, such as in England the police would seize upon; and he gave it back with a curt 'Thank you' to the Colonel.

The above incident, so far as Vernon's peace was concerned, was the worst prepara-

tion possible for what was about to follow. The party presently set out for the Hotel gardens ; and, during the short walk thither, kept more or less together. The head gardener was summoned ; the directions of the Duchess were given, and the little group was on the point of moving on again. Vernon looked towards Miss Walters, hoping she might fall behind with him. A look was enough ; he did not repeat it ; in an instant he felt what had happened—she was attached to Colonel Stapleton. Step by step did these two separate themselves, letting the others go on ahead of them, and pausing at times on pretence of examining something, that they might keep or increase their distance. Vernon's heart was full of pain and bitterness, and he walked almost silent by Lady Walters and Lord Surbiton. Suddenly a surprise was caused by the sight of another party, which made his lordship exclaim, ' It's lucky

that her Grace isn't here!' The trespassers proved to be a certain set from Nice, amongst whom Vernon recognised a few of his own acquaintance. Of this number was a certain Mrs. Crane, one of the fairest and freest of the married women of London. She not only knew Vernon, but his companions also; and, quitting her own party, she advanced to meet the others, whom a halt had again united.

'I'm dying,' said Mrs. Crane, 'to get out on that reef of rocks there, but the people I'm with have not got a spark of enterprise; and my boots have such high heels that I daren't venture alone.'

'Let me be your guide,' said Vernon; 'I know the way perfectly.' And he fixed his eyes on her with a look of shallow tenderness.

'I,' said Miss Walters, 'should like to come too. I have often watched those rocks and wished I could get out to them.'

The instant she spoke Vernon turned

sharp round to her. Mrs. Crane noticed the movement. But the impulses of the jealous reverse themselves in a flash of lightning, and the eager gesture was followed by the coldest of tones. 'The walk is perfectly easy,' he said, 'if Colonel Stapleton will give you a hand now and then. I have been there myself continually.'

Both the elders declined so rough a pilgrimage, and the two younger couples set off by themselves, Miss Walters still with the Colonel, and Vernon with Mrs. Crane.

'Well, Mr. Vernon,' said that lady presently, 'I've not seen you since that charming Sunday last summer, when we went down together on the drag to Maidenhead. At least I have seen you, though you were far too well occupied to take any notice of me. I saw you at Monte Carlo, and I saw, too, who it was you were talking to. However,' she added, as she glanced behind her towards

Miss Walters, 'you've a prettier one now to play with—that is, if Colonel Jack will allow you.'

'What has he got to do with it?' said Vernon, a little brusquely.

'What has not he? There he is now side by side with her. My good friend, don't you wish you were in the shoes of one of them?'

'Upon my word,' said Vernon, 'I can't say I do. If ever I want Miss Walters she is my next-door neighbour, so I could well spare her for an hour or two, even if all my heart were set on her. Besides, at the present moment, how could I even wish to better myself? You're very pretty, and I'm very agreeable; and when there's nobody better to hand, you know quite well that you have a *caprice* for me.'

Love and its kindred feelings can make the wisest men like children, and when it does not make them children in the best sense

of the word, it will often make them childish in the worst. It can not only bring back the simplicity, but also the tempers, of the nursery. Of these last, one of the least lovely forms is a sullenness towards one person, expressed by effusion towards another. It was this form of temper which now overcame Vernon. He could not spend his day in making love to Miss Walters, so he resolved to spend it in making love to Mrs. Crane. Nor was Mrs. Crane in the least displeased at this. It was strictly true that, amongst a hundred other *caprices*, she had one that she could quite distinguish for Vernon; and as all that she demanded of most of her male friends was, not that their devotion should be constant, but only that it should recur on occasion, no jealousy of a rival made her in the least cold or *difficile*. Vernon and she were thus soon on the tenderest terms, as they had often been before

for five or six hours together; and by the time they had reached the special rock they were making for, they were pretty well advanced in a very unmasked flirtation. This was just what Vernon in his present mood wished for; and when the two others joined them, and the four sat down together, he hoped that his conduct would not escape Miss Walters. This was a child's bit of temper, but he had a man's self-possession in showing it. He betrayed no sullenness to the person he wished to wound; he addressed her instead with an easy, genial indifference, which he knew would be more effective; and an intuitive sense thrilled him that each of his smiles was freezing her.

At first, however, when she looked about her she was lost in the lovely prospect. He could see how its beauty sank into her, like a stone into a clear well. 'What a contrast,' she said, 'between that grey cliff and the

water! And how one little plume of foam tosses over the sunken rock!

‘Yes, beautiful,’ said Vernon civilly, with a slight, fatuous laugh. ‘It’s all as charming as can be; though, for my own part, the love of scenery is one of the many things I have outlived, I think.’

Mrs. Crane patted him with her pretty gloved hand, and said, ‘You tell that to your grandmother. Don’t flatter yourself, my dear man, that you’ve outlived the sweets of life yet.’

‘You are right,’ said Vernon, as he looked at her; ‘for I have not outlived you.’

Mrs. Crane acknowledged the compliment with an impertinent little grimace, that became her admirably; and then, turning sharp to the Colonel, she made an observation on a slight red mark on his temple. ‘What on earth have you been up to?’ she said. ‘Has Colonel Jack been fighting?’

‘Upon my soul,’ cried the Colonel, ‘it was something rather like it. What made the mark was a pistol bullet.’ This announcement created the right surprise, but the Colonel plainly was talking with no eye to effect ; nor was there the least bravado in the way in which he told his story. He had been sleeping, it appeared, the preceding night at Nice ; and, arriving late there from Monte Carlo, he had walked to his hotel from the station. In a lonely place he had been beset by two men, it seemed with the intent of robbing him. ‘One of the fellows,’ he said, ‘a little chap, I knocked down in a moment. The other fired a pistol at me ; and then, not seeing me fall, he bolted. There have been several cases of the same sort this winter ; and for the future,’ he went on, producing a revolver, ‘I shall not go out late without this.’

The weapon was a small one, finely

chased with silver, and Mrs. Crane inquired if it would really kill a man.

‘It’s killed two men already,’ said the Colonel. ‘If it hadn’t been for that, I should have been a dead dog at Alexandria five years ago.’

The tone of the speaker was in all this so modest, that Vernon was conscious of a kind of grudging respect for him ; but what most amazed him was the aspect of Miss Walters. She was staring at the Colonel, not with the least interest or anxiety, but simply as if his face fascinated her. As for him, he was guiltless of any wish to be serious ; and his next observation showed it. ‘Bless me, Miss Cynthia,’ he said, putting his hand on her arm familiarly, ‘what a knowing coat you’ve got on to-day ! Just turn my way and let me look at it. How many inches round in the waist does that make you ?’

She at once roused herself, and with a

smile and a frown together, 'Two inches more,' she said, 'than I should be without it.'

There was nothing in her manner that could be set down as coquetry ; yet Vernon, whose perceptions were in a super-sensitive state, detected something in it that made him turn sharp away from her. Presently they all rose, and began to set about returning.

Mrs. Crane, though she was not piqued on account of Miss Walters, was far too true a woman to be able to keep silent about her ; and as she and Vernon were descending the rocks together, she again opened the subject.

'Come,' she said, 'and tell me honestly how you like her.'

'I hardly know her,' said Vernon drily.

'Exactly ; and I doubt if you ever will. I've seen her at Florence before now ; and all the foreigners were at first sight in love

with her. But it was at first sight only. She's as cold as ice afterwards. Every man I've heard speak of her, has told me the same story.'

'That fellow Stapleton,' said Vernon, 'seems to get on well enough with her.'

Mrs. Crane broke out into a little, malicious laugh. 'My dear man,' she said, 'I saw all along you were thinking so. I can see when a man's jealous as plainly as I can see what his necktie is. But you must be a goose if you're jealous of fat Jack Stapleton. He was a dangerous man once, I grant you; but if he wants any conquests now, he has to go rather farther afield for them: and, from my own little observations at Monte Carlo, I suspect he goes farther afield pretty often. Besides, as for that girl there, he might just as well be her elder brother, or her uncle. He must have grown tired of kissing her before she was well out of the nursery. Just

listen now, how she chatters to him. That's not the tone of a lover.'

Miss Walters' voice, it is true, was at that moment raised slightly. She was preparing to cross the last piece of broken ground ; and Vernon distinctly heard her, as she declined the Colonel's assistance. 'Thank you,' she said, 'I can get on quite well by myself. Really, my dear Jack, there's no need for you to be so affectionate.'

Vernon knew not why, but he uttered an inaudible oath to himself.

When they regained the gardens, Mrs. Crane found her own party had flown, and Lady Walters announced with a smile that Lord Surbiton had done so likewise. He had been carried off by a fascinating Polish countess. 'Why, it's the very woman,' said Mrs. Crane, 'that my own husband's in love with. And of course he's gone off too. Now, isn't that like a husband?'

‘My dear,’ said Lady Walters, ‘you needn’t put yourself out. You know the train that they are going by, and I said that I would send you in our carriage to the station. Or if you like to wait for dinner, we should be very happy to see you. These gentlemen too, in case they have no other designs for themselves—we should be exceedingly glad if they would enliven us with their company.’

She looked round with an inquiry at Vernon and Colonel Stapleton. The latter at once assented; Vernon declined, having business, he said, that evening. ‘Very well then,’ smiled Lady Walters, ‘we will hope for you at some other time.’ He trusted that Miss Walters would take notice of this refusal; but he found she was standing even more near to him than he thought she was. The branch of a rose-tree had caught itself in her hat, and he heard her, in a constrained

voice, asking him if he would disengage it for her. He was startled by her tone, and still more by the look she gave him. There was something in both of them, timid, piteous, and appealing. She reminded him of some wounded animal. He was in no mood, however, to be moved by impressions of this kind. He did the service she asked of him with the same easy politeness as heretofore; but when in the process, by accident, his hand touched her shoulder, he recoiled from it as if he had touched hot iron.

He discovered, the moment after, that Mrs. Crane as well as himself had declined Lady Walters' invitation; and a new inspiration seized him. 'Why should Lady Walters,' he said, 'be at the trouble of having her horses out? I can see Mrs. Crane to the station, if she has no objection to waiting here.'

Mrs. Crane's eyes flashed with a pleased intelligence ; and the matter was so settled.

‘ In that case,’ said Miss Walters, ‘ we may as well be going back.’ And the parties prepared to separate. As she took leave of Vernon, her voice seemed still unnatural, ‘ And are you *never*,’ she murmured, ‘ coming to see me again ?’ This was not, however, the last thing he heard of her ; for turning to her aunt she said, ‘ We may as well dine punctually, as Frederic Stanley does not like late hours.’ These simple words had a sudden effect in one quarter. Colonel Stapleton with a frown drew Miss Walters apart a little ; his face changed ; he had evidently lost command of himself. ‘ What !’ he exclaimed in an undertone, ‘ and is Mr. Stanley going to dine with you ?’

‘ He is,’ she answered coldly. ‘ Do you happen to have any objection ?’

‘Objection!’ cried the Colonel, still between his teeth. ‘My dear girl, are you an utter, absolute idiot? What the Devil’s the good of my coming, if you’ve got that confounded parson with you?’

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